time chaser

jesse gordon

The only way back home lies beyond
the maniacal watch of a timeless adversary . . .

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To the family,
for being ever so patient.

1. Moon 3

The beaches of Moon 3 were known to be some of the most beautiful in the galaxy. Crystal clear waters lapped at white sands faintly glittering in the violet light of the weather satellites orbiting above. Here and there, tall, spindly-looking palms and lulling goose-tongues swayed in a gentle breeze that tousled the shore during an utterly breathtaking (if man-made) evening.

When Storm arrived, he didn't notice anything other than the ground rushing at him violently. Just before he impacted, his body's descent slowed to almost nothing as it came into sync with the environment, and he gently tripped, sprawled —landed face-down on the sand. Of course, it was all merely mental inertia; he wasn't actually thrown onto the beach (time travel wasn't so melodramatic)—but it sure felt like it.

This is how it always is, he thought, lying very still for a moment and imagining himself as a hunk of smoldering meat. *Nearly wetting my pants for no reason...I must look like an idiot.*

He spit sand from his mouth, coughed and rolled into a sitting position to examine himself before anything else. He wasn't, in fact, smoldering or naked or rippling with cheesy Hollywood special effects. Free-form streaming worked just as well as the commercial stuff, clothes and all. Technically, anything on your person or within your temporal radius was fair game. If only someone had mentioned that to all those unclad movie time travelers *before* they'd gone on their trademark clothes-boots-motorcycle rampages.

Physically, Storm was in pristine condition, retaining all the qualities of his original athletically-inclined (and, yes, needlessly vain) template—with the added tweaks manifested by intense mental concentration.

Ordain it, and it shall come, he thought, remembering DK's favorite mantra. Even at this rather refined point in his life, Storm still had to work at it. Other chasers could appear and disappear, walk through walls, step between realities like graceful acrobats performing on a podium; Storm could barely keep himself from throwing up each time he transcended the cosmos.

Quit your complaining—you're on a schedule, remember?

He looked around. The beach was devoid of people. He got to his feet and looked up into the sky, where he saw the appropriate satellite orbiting slowly, giving off its artificial light. Behind the beach, farther up the mainland, was the city, glowing brightly in the nighttime haze.

Checks out. Now, where's Chris?

Storm held himself, fighting off the residual disorientation, and started walking

along the beach, counting in his head the passing minutes. It was a pleasant evening (Moon 3 was a tourist retreat, and as such had impeccable weather management). However, Storm still found himself shivering—not from physical cold, but from the ominous fact that the longer it took Chris to find him, the more chance there was of a police officer catching him first.

He stopped beside one of the palm trees, pressed himself against its trunk when he noticed a faint humming sound in the air coming from the direction of the sea. The noise got steadily louder, and it quickly became apparent a small shuttle was approaching. Storm watched as the craft, searchlights darting to and fro like reaching arms, skimmed across the lapping water. As the craft crept closer, he prayed that his friend (and not some Patrolman) was at the controls, as he was certainly in no position to face the latter.

After a brief search, the light settled on Storm and his tree, and a menacing voice rang out in the night:

"*This is Moon 3 Time Patrol. Step out into the open with your hands behind your head.*"

The Patrolman's voice had a familiar ring to it (*Chris?*), yet Storm's instincts kept him from stepping forward. Out in the open, he would be defenseless against a potential capture. But then again, what else could he do? Obviously he'd been spotted—now it was only a matter of by whom.

"*I repeat. This is Moon 3 Time Patrol. Step out into the open with your hands behind your head.*"

Storm sucked in a quick breath. He stepped out into the light. He had to keep his face tilted away from the shuttle as it landed in order to keep from being totally blinded.

"*Get on your knees—keep those hands up!*"

Storm did as he was told and began to seriously wonder why he'd trusted in chance to see him through. *Damned sloppy,* he thought. Too early to know if his plan had backfired, too late to hope for an easy escape—

"*Look down at the ground!*"

Averting his gaze from the shuttle, he swore silently and reminded himself to kick his own butt when he had a free moment—*if* he had a free moment. Chances were when Moon 3's police force got through with him he wouldn't want much more than a nice prison cell in which to recover.

A door slid open and Storm heard the sound of the Patrolman hopping down onto the sand, his laser rifle clinking menacingly. A moment later and the man's boot tips were just beneath Storm's forehead. There was the feel of cold metal pressed against his back, and a single word from the Patrolman's mouth:

"Zap."

With knotted neck muscles giving way to shudders, and his heart pounding in his chest, Storm blinked and craned his head up.

Chris was standing over him and grinning devilishly.

"What the *hell*?" muttered Storm. He'd come *so* close to urinating all over himself.

Chris chuckled, slung his laser rifle over his shoulder and offered a hand to help Storm up. "Just keeping you on your feet. It was getting redundant sitting out over the water for hours on end and listening to the police scanner banter about whose wife has been cheating on whose husband and so on. I'm glad you were on time for once."

"Don't get me wrong, it's good to see you," Storm said, "but you're going to pay for this."

Chris chuckled again, ushered him into the shuttle (a small two-man craft), and reclaimed the pilot's seat. "I've got a change of clothes back there for you," he said, pointing at the rear compartment, "and food, if you're hungry. Best we take our leave right away if we don't want the *real* night watchmen to give us any trouble."

The rear of the craft was somewhat cramped, as one would expect of a shuttle designed for short-range missions. However, the engineers had allowed for a little comfort. There was a shiny gray settee built into the side wall, upon which Storm found a black jumpsuit, boots, and an identification badge. With a small amount of amusement, he noticed that his badge designated him as "freelance merchant"—a humble but relatively sovereign position when it came to space travel. He wondered if Chris had gone the extra mile and acquired a decent set of galactic passports as well.

Storm hefted the jumpsuit, paused to check his appearance in the pull-down mirror that hung just beside the settee. He looked the same as always: handsome, early twenties, beardless, blond hair, blue eyes, five-foot-ten, smooth, flawless skin, chiseled, athletic build. He had vanity written all over him—his parents' idea. The supermodel who wasn't so super after all. The Olympian who never made it to the Olympics. He attempted ineffectually to fix his hair, which was untidy and full of sand grains, so that whenever he turned his head, his scalp glittered. A souvenir of his brief visit to Moon 3.

I have to admit, he thought, swapping out old clothes for new, *I look good for a guy who's pushing a hundred and thirty-seven. That is, if the leftists haven't finally gotten rid of Earth's old calendar by now.*

He entered the shuttle's cockpit and seated himself beside Chris. "So, we're traders now, are we?"

Past the control panel, a network of flashing meters and digital read-outs, was the forward viewport. An overlay screen offered a splendid view of Moon 3 as the planet rapidly receded into the star-flecked ambiance of space.

"Yep," replied Chris with a broad grin. "We specialize in counterfeit clothing and imitation jewelry, all at the lowest prices in the galaxy."

Storm cringed slightly, but kept his smile. "Why such meager merch? Why not silver or real jewelry? The cheaper stuff, anyway. Make some money out of the deal."

"Hey, one man's treasure," Chris replied, easing the controls offhandedly as he looked over at Storm. "They're all quality knock-offs. The silver lining is that we probably won't attract the attention of bandits, so we shouldn't have much trouble keeping out of everyone's way until we get to where it is we're going."

Shrugging, Storm nodded. He would have made a wry comment, but his mind was still a bit sluggish from his recent transition. He was still thinking in pieces. "What's the date?"

"2416. You've been in flux for ten years, buddy."

Ten years. Enough time to explain Chris's appearance. He'd put on some weight, grown a faint beard, and acquired some gray hairs around his temples, where the former blond ones were beginning to thin just a little bit—though otherwise he was still as stalwart as ever. *The result of staying in the Standard time stream,* Storm thought. *It makes you count your breaths with the years.* In another decade or two, Chris really *would* be old. And after that...one more friend come and gone.

"You're looking well," he said, feeling as if he were inadvertently requesting that his friend answer for his own human failings. "How are the wife and kids?"

"Just fine. Claire had our fourth two years ago. A girl. Steve's just begun his sophomore year at Mars Academy. Says he wants to be a terraformer."

Storm listened, glanced out the window and watched the glittering spaceway markers whiz by. Ten years. He'd been floating around for ten years while the rest of the universe had moved on. Steve had been only a boy then, and now he was a man. In another ten or twenty years he would be an older man.

The price of being a chaser. The price of freedom.

"Storm?"

He blinked and turned away from the window. Chris had his hand on his shoulder. There was a concerned look in his eyes.

"I'm all right," Storm muttered. He smiled somewhat dreamily, as if just coming out of a long sleep. "This always happens to me after a stream. When you spend ten years drifting around the cosmos without a body...it's kind of overwhelming when suddenly you're thrown back into the flesh."

Chris nodded and handed him a lukewarm flask. "Here, drink up. Real coffee from real beans I picked up during my last Earth visit. Not a synthesized ingredient in there, I assure you."

Storm took the flask and drank with enthusiasm.

2. Interception

"*This is Trader Eklund-1372, coming up behind the rusty Cadillac spewing out more space dust than a supernova. Get off the road—you're smoking out the place.*"

"*I'll be damned! Ol' Chris yipping at my heels a week early! What's the problem? You need another piggyback to the nearest trailer park?*"

"*Not this time, buddy. Stopping off at The Pit to get the Cassini out of dry dock, then I'm taking a little trip to Port Carr. You know if Gregori is in town?*"

"*Ah, is there a more shameless trader this side of Orion? Yeah, he's in. What could you possibly want with such a degenerate?*"

"*Business, my boy. Doesn't matter what, so long as I get my cut, you know?*"

"*I hear you. Say, do you have some free time on your hands? Why not drop over for a while and we can have a game of pool together?*"

"*Sorry, bud. Got to keep the clients happy, and that means I have a schedule to keep. I'll be in touch, though.*"

"*Maybe next time, then. Stay out of trouble. End comm.*"

* * *

"I've been making friends all over the Trader Ways," Chris explained, leaning back against the settee and sipping coffee from his flask. "I got into the biz just after you last left. Seemed a reasonable enough change considering the growing tensions over stream abuse. Claire, bless her heart, has stuck with me, raising the kids while I'm out here gallivanting around like some swashbuckling entrepreneur. Thankfully, the Time Patrol hasn't laid a finger on me or my family—and that's probably due to the fact that I haven't mentioned you to anyone. I stop in at home twice a year. Not enough by a long shot, but, well, as long as the family's okay. I'm making enough of the good stuff to keep clothes on the kids' backs, food on the table. Plus, I just had the Cassini re-outfitted, new navigators and all. Wait until you see her, Storm. She's the most beautiful cruiser you'll ever set your eyes on."

"I can hardly wait," said Storm with a half-smile, which faded promptly when he thought of the reasons behind his friend's current arrangement. *From family man to man on the run—because of me.* "I never meant for any of this to happen to you."

"So you owe me one. Done and done. I'm agreeable."

Storm smiled again, found himself actually chuckling this time. "Just what I needed: one more life debt. I'll add it to the collection."

"Do I detect a bit of sarcasm?" Chris laughed, a playful look on his face.

"Might I remind you," said Storm, a bit of the gleam returning to his eyes, "that I'm old enough to be your great grandfather?"

"Ah, now it's coming back to me. The last time we had a moment together. What was it we bet on that arm-wrestling match?"

Hopping off his crate, Storm shoved it before the settee. "As I recall, we never finished before the feds came a'knockin'."

"Hell, you're right!"

Chris downed the last of his coffee, tucked away the flask. Then he rolled up his sleeves, revealing formidable muscles that slithered menacingly under his skin as he cracked his fingers. Storm, pleased to see that time hadn't yet taken away Chris's physical vitality, did the same and clasped his partner's hand.

"On three. One...two...*three!*"

Silence ensued as they engaged themselves in the match. Brows furrowed, veins bulged, but both of their arms remained at the halfway point, quivering, straining. Chris's usual strategy was to expend only the necessary amount of energy keeping his arm straight up until his opponent began to weaken. Then he poured on the brawn. Storm, perhaps not well-acquainted with the art of arm-wrestling, or not yet fully adjusted to his newly fleshed body, tried too hard too fast, and knew as his arm started to get sore that he was going to lose. Nevertheless, he remained determined to go down with dignity, focusing all his attention on his labors until the flask at his feet caught his attention. It was trembling, sliding sideways. Since the artificial gravity generator was obviously still operating, the deck appeared perfectly level, but all around the rear compartment of the shuttle, objects not fastened or restrained were shaking and rolling all over the place.

"Damn, gravity well!" Chris exclaimed, rising unsteadily to his feet, the wrestling match forgotten. "There must be a ship on *top* of us!"

Storm said nothing as he followed him into the cockpit, where he strapped himself into the co-pilot's seat. There was only one reason any ship would come into such dangerously close range: interception.

"You remember how to handle the scanners?" Chris asked, taking the shuttle off autopilot.

"Yeah."

"Good. What are we dealing with here?"

Instinct took over as Storm's fingers flew about the console. "Looks like a moderate-sized cargo vessel, military-grade navigators, no registry number. They're armed."

"Bandits. Usually don't have to deal with them this far out."

There was a brief hum, and the deck rumbled beneath Storm's feet as the inertial dampeners went wonky. Suddenly he was side-heavy.

"They're pulling us in," he murmured.

"Not without a fight. Hang on!" Chris pulled up on the yoke. The star field went into a spin as the shuttle performed a somersault and reoriented itself behind the attacking ship.

Storm frowned. "Please tell me these guys are just some old gambling buddies."

"I don't think so," replied Chris nervously, concern causing his face to crease. "Shoot, and I don't even have a squirt gun onboard."

"What about the rifle you were waving around back on the beach?"

"Empty."

"Wonderful," Storm sighed, unbuckling his safety belt. "I don't suppose we can take out their entire crew through hand-to-hand combat?"

Chris shrugged. "We'll think of something. We always do."

3. Bandit Cell

Trying to sleep was an inconvenience in itself; trying to sleep with your ankles and wrists shackled to a cold metal wall was downright annoying.

There were seven men, including Storm and Chris, confined to the converted storage cabin. All were human except for one, a Gecko with green, patterned skin. He spoke the least, left the human men to their own devices, though there wasn't much of anything to do but hang limply in desolation. The general morale was, as one would expect, quite low—particularly among those who had not been fed in days. No one bothered with pleasantries, no one offered up idle chat to pass the time.

Storm fidgeted in his shackles, a mixture of dried blood and sweat sticking to his face and making him wish for water. He looked over to where Chris had been strung up, found that his friend was dozing. He had a swollen lip; dried blood caked his cheek.

At least we're still in one piece, Storm thought, *though that may not last long if our captors are in a bad mood.* Glancing around the cell, he discerned a multitude of rather nasty cuts and bruises on his fellow captives' bodies. He attempted mentally to retrace his steps to the point where he and Chris had still been aboard the shuttle, scrambling for some sort of plan, coming to the ultimate realization that they were in deep trouble as the bandits had boarded, overpowered them almost immediately.

"You're a chaser, aren't you?" Chris had whispered as they were being dragged along the gangway. "Can't you...*do* something?"

Storm had simply rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'll just wiggle my fingers and turn everyone into toads."

Had he been raised as a circus performer instead of an athlete, such a trick might not have gone unappreciated.

Storm turned his head and stared off to his left, studied the lines of the deck, and, following one, then the other toward the opposite wall, found himself examining the lizard fellow. Most likely a brother of the Gecko Tree. The pure bloods all had the same brown-green variation running the length of their torsos.

The lizard-man's eyes opened suddenly, narrowing, focusing on Storm. A forked tongue flicked. "Why do you seek time if it is your enemy?"

Storm blinked, a bit surprised (and embarrassed) that he'd been caught staring. "Excuse me?"

"Your ego, Storm Anderson, reveals your distaste for cosmic measurements, yet you have used those very measurements to achieve your present state."

The Gecko's speech was heavily accented (too many "h" sounds), but his words were clear and crisp. Storm decided not to respond directly. "You speak human, and English, at that. How do you know my name?"

"My people have heard of you, as have many others in our galaxy. You may call me Sven. I must say you have done remarkably well in your fight against the Standard Stream. Most humans yield to the lure of time until it has ravaged their bodies, dulled their minds."

Storm nodded as best he could. "I try."

"You have broken free, you have ignored time's call and denied its deadly hand. Yet it has drawn you back to the stream of your birth. You would not be here otherwise."

"I *chose* to return to Standard," Storm clarified. "Time is simply a tool I use to get where I want to be."

"Ah," murmured Sven with a sly smile. "The creed of any good time chaser, yes?"

"It's not an occupation."

Sven nodded. "But it must be. While we may not escape this web of existence, we are allowed to crawl along its many threads, in any direction we please—only if we make it a priority to preserve our own freedom."

Thinking briefly of a spider consuming its prey, Storm discarded the analogy and simply went silent, wondering how much longer it would be until he could get some food into his stomach.

However, Sven was still talkative. "What sort of consummation do you seek by shedding your mortal skin?"

Storm wasn't sure he liked this fellow's prodding. "I'm not sure I understand the question."

The forked tongue flicked again. "Why are you a time chaser, Storm?"

"Because I hate putting good flesh to waste, because...I guess I never believed in getting old or dying as a way of life. Not once I learned the truth. Everyday life is too restricting. It's not for me."

"Ah. Freedom is a noble treasure, is it not?"

Not if you don't have anyone to spend it with, Storm thought. An image of Trudie popped unceremoniously into his mind, and for a moment, through a long-lost memory, she was with him again, clasping him around the waist and whispering silly words into his ear as they walked along the San Francisco coast. Yes, there was more to his search, but he held it within himself, for it was his only sacred spot, his only gilded hope—untouchable by anyone or anything.

As long as he kept it to himself.

"Why are *you* in here?" he asked, looking at Sven once again. "Are you a chaser as well? Do our bandit friends go around picking up people like us for the ransom?"

Sven nodded. "Apparently, that is the case. But we each pay our own price, we each *carry* our own price."

"Mine must be astronomical," Storm grumbled, and allowed his head to tilt

forward somewhat. He stared contemplatively at the deck once again.

* * *

The sound of the prison cell door sliding open roused Storm from a fitful slumber. He blinked and groaned from the stiffness of his neck, experiencing the more difficult aspect of living in a flesh body: pain. In his wrists the sensation was more acute where the metal of the shackles chafed against his skin, leaving unsightly marks.

"Dinnertime, boys."

He watched in silence as four men entered the cell. The one who'd spoken was obviously a caretaker of sorts; he carried a tray with several bowls on it. He immediately went to the prisoner hanging closest to the door and offered him a spoonful of protein paste.

The remaining three bandits appeared to be of higher rank, as they wore black uniforms with red sashes. Red was traditionally the color of the bandit, and it was obvious here that these men enjoyed displaying their status as criminal travelers when it suited them.

"Well, well, look at you," crooned the middle bandit, a perennially-idiotic smile on his face. He strode forward until he was face to face with Storm. "Storm Anderson, in the flesh, and without a single wrinkle on that expensive face of yours."

Beside him, Storm heard Chris breathe a near-silent obscenity, which was enough to attract Idiot's attention.

"And who would this be?" Idiot cooed. "Your father, perhaps?" He raised his hand as if to strike Chris across the face, but Storm quickly spoke up:

"So, what exactly is the price on my head now?"

Like a little boy who couldn't keep his attention on one thing too long, Idiot, unaware that one of his own prisoners had just discovered a possible character flaw, lowered his hand and faced Storm again. "Enough to make all the trouble it's going to take getting you to the appropriate authorities worth the money. Now eat up. We wouldn't want you getting too stringy on us."

He exited the cabin, leaving his companions behind to watch over things.

The caretaker had made his way to Chris, who was eating despite his apparent distaste for the menu.

Better than dying, Storm thought. He'd been in this situation before. *Being treated like animals until we can find a way to escape. Or until we're sold off to our respective buyers. There's going to be a chain of purchases, each scoundrel commanding his own price until we've been traded around enough to make even Gregori sick. Then we get turned over to the feds. I'd better get this right.*

When it came his turn at chow, he smiled politely and tightly clamped his mouth around the spoon thrust at him. The bandit looked up and caught his gaze, and a curious expression spread across his face. Some of what Storm was doing was mere charisma, the leftovers from his runway model days, when he'd learned how

to grab and hold anyone's attention for as long as he fancied. Over the years, the trick had been extended and enhanced by various mental concentration exercises (DK had been instrumental in this respect). Unblinking, both men exchanged nods as the chamber became exceedingly quiet and everyone else watched on in bewilderment. The other two bandits, noticing something was up, stepped forward simultaneously.

"What's going on?" asked one, placing a hand on the caretaker's shoulder and another on his weapon.

Slowly, all three bandits turned and looked questioningly at each other as if they were confused by something. They conversed in odd strangled sounds and twisted expressions before one finally turned again and produced a small palm-sized remote from his jumpsuit: the controller to the shackles. At the press of a button, all the prisoners were freed from their confinement. Chris and Sven took their cues well, immediately stepping around the bandits and removing their weapons while they watched on in a childish fashion. Storm spit the spoon from his mouth, took a laser rifle and pointed it at the caretaker's head, then nodded to the others as he blinked for the first time since initiating the hypnosis.

"How the hell did he do that?" asked one of the freed men.

Chris shook his head and shrugged. "He's an immortal. They know things." He faced Storm and scowled slightly. "Though I don't understand why the hell he couldn't have done it sooner. Say, *before* the black eye and busted lip?"

"It takes balance, patience," said Storm. "I'm not an expert just yet." He brought his elbow down on the back of Idiot's head. "But that's a conversation for another day. I trust the rest of you gents would agree that commandeering the ship is our best course of action?"

Everyone nodded.

* * *

With more than a few aches and pains marring the experience, Storm and Chris made their way through the corridors virtually unnoticed. They found the cockpit, which was unguarded. Two young pilots sat at the controls and looked rather frightened at the prospect of having guns held to their heads. Other than that, they were no trouble. Storm took out one, Chris the other.

"Real amateurs," Storm whispered, lowering his pilot to the deck. "We lucked out. These guys could have been *good* at what they do."

Chris nodded and took the pilot's seat. "Yeah, but what does that say about us, letting ourselves get captured by such riffraff? Hey, do me a favor and hit the emergency-containment button, would you? That should stave off the ghouls for awhile."

As he was searching the console for the correct key, Storm spotted the navigational display, with a red cursor marking their present location.

"Damn it," he breathed, annoyed. "We're coming up on Sparrow."

"So that's what that blue ball over there is," Chris replied, not without humor,

as he peered at the viewport. “That means we’re three days away from Port Carr, four from New Babylon.”

Storm leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. The longer he remained in this time stream, the more chance there was of being caught by the Patrol. There was no guarantee that the bandits hadn’t already contacted their associates down on Sparrow with news of their impending arrival—and if the cops were listening in, if they knew *the* Storm Anderson was making a pit stop...

“We’re going to need another ship,” Chris murmured. “If we want to get back to Port Carr on time, it’ll have to be under some other guise. Luckily for us, Sparrow is a pretty good place to blend in when you don’t want to be seen, if you get my drift.”

Storm shot him a suggestive look. “How would you know?”

“I’ve done some blending in myself, for various reasons. Add it to the list of things we can talk about later. I hope our gracious hosts have an escape pod somewhere onboard.”

Indeed, Sparrow’s bright, Earth-like atmosphere was filling up most of the viewport by now, and soon the orbiting security ships, which navigated their way around all major planetary bodies, would be asking for proper identification, the nature of their cargo, and their purpose for visiting.

“Well, then,” Storm said, rising and slinging his laser rifle over his shoulder. “I believe it’s time for a little joyride in the escape pod.”

“Agreed,” said Chris. “And the first thing we do when we get planetside is find a good Mexican restaurant.”

4. Great Hope

The city of Great Hope was the largest (and poorest) trading city on Sparrow. This part of the planet was technologically underdeveloped, most of the houses and buildings that sprawled along the intertwining, packed-dirt streets three or four stories high and made of stone, some wood or tin. Instead of shuttles or skimmers rushing along the streets, there were old-fashioned carts and wagons—and people, of all shapes, sizes, and races. The men and women were sun-browned, with long, unkempt hair and patchwork clothes lost to dust and the elements; the children were much the same and, more often than not, burdened with bushels of fabric, or crates filled with fruits or vegetables.

Chris shook his head. "The galaxy's sweatshop."

Storm nodded, walking casually beside his friend amidst a sea of random bodies. It was a hot day, and since there was little shade, their clothes had the distinct smell of sweat and unwashed skin that seemed to eternally pollute the air of Great Hope's streets. Even with his sleeves rolled up and the upper-portion of his suit unzipped, the heat was unbearable, and he could feel his head throbbing.

Despite the overcrowded condition of the streets today, there was no shortage of vendors trying to sell their respective goods to anyone who looked wealthy enough to spare a few units.

"I need something to drink," Storm muttered, and shielded his eyes from the sun long enough to spot a street vendor who was selling what appeared to be oranges. "Over there," he said, pointing. "He's got canteens. I hope you have some money on you."

"Sure thing," replied Chris, carefully wiping his forehead with his sleeve, "if by money you mean the patience to stand quietly out of the way while you work your supermodel-slash-chaser magic."

Storm shrugged. "It's always nice to know you've got my back."

"Har-har. Get busy, pretty-boy."

Cutting a course through the masses of people, Storm and Chris approached the vendor, a short, stocky man, bare to the waist. In muscle-knotted, sunburned arms he hoisted two canteens and shouted over the roar of the street. After repeating the same thing over and over in several different languages, he finally switched to something resembling English:

"Give him here, give him today, give him fresh: sweet water claimed from protection Sparrow well! Factory new! No germ! Five unit each, but only today!"

Geez, thought Storm, eyeing the vendor shrewdly. *Five units is enough to buy a good meal back on Earth. At least, it used to be.* Nevertheless, the quarts of

overpriced, sun-warmed water were looking pretty good right now.

"Come, come!" the vendor continued. "Buy now, buy now! Wet water soften throat! Five unit!"

Storm considered his options, calculated the viability of a number of distractive tactics against the hustle and bustle of the street—but Chris suddenly grabbed his arm.

"Uh, oh," he said. "Forget wetting our precious little tongues. We've got trouble."

Storm looked out across the sea of people, at first seeing nothing more than face after face after face—and then he spotted them. Police officers—and not just the planetary patrol, but intergalactic officers, as anyone could tell from the glittering badges on their uniforms. They were armed with laser rifles.

"Someone's tipped off the feds about us," Storm muttered.

"Maybe they're just making the rounds."

"Maybe if we explain the situation over tea they'll understand and let us go."

"I bet it was the tall bandit. Should we meet again, I'm going to rough him up *proper*."

"I'd like to be there for that." Storm thrust his hand into Chris's. "Until then, this is where we part ways for the night. I'll meet you tomorrow, noon, back at that large fountain we passed on the way in."

"The one with the Xiao-Ping relief?"

"Is that who it is?"

"Haven't you ever seen the documentaries?"

"I've been in flux."

"Right. Okay then. May God have humor on the souls of fools like us."

"Ditto."

The crowd swallowed them, then. Storm tried his best to act native and peered past the closely-cropped buildings on either side of the street. It appeared there was another street, just as packed as this one, on the other side of a row of residentials. The people and buildings seemed to stretch into infinity in every direction but up, where he glanced nervously when he heard a shuttle humming past. Its hull was gray, which meant it likely wasn't a police craft, but that didn't mean the next one wouldn't be.

I've got to get under a roof somewhere, he thought to himself, making his way toward the edge of the street. Between two triple-story buildings was a narrow alley cluttered with trash bins. He quickly ducked in and tried not to breathe too much of the stench of rotting garbage as he leaned against the warm stone wall and thought of what to do next. On any other civilized planet there would have been the regular garbage recyclers, the ones that converted all waste into a simpler form of matter that could be more easily disposed of. At least that way there wasn't the smell, the waste of precious space, the unwanted microorganisms multiplying unchecked—

—a sound coming from further down the alley caught his attention: a woman was trying to scream, but her noises were being muffled.

Not hesitating, Storm picked his way through the trash and past an ill-placed overflowing bin to where he found the caller. She was being held against the wall by another human, a man dressed in ragged shorts and a torn shirt. His hand was searching the woman's clothing for whatever valuables she possessed—no, he wasn't just trying to rob her of money, the way his hand abruptly found its way up her dress, between her legs.

Storm immediately launched himself at the attacker. He grabbed the man by the shoulder, flung him around and punched him square in the face. Another fist planted in the man's stomach coupled with a kick in the groin sent the thief wobbling down onto his knees. As the man doubled over and curled into a ball, a laminated card fell out of his hand. It was a food card, Storm discovered when he picked it up and turned to face the woman.

"I'm guessing this is yours," he said, holding out the card with one hand and wiping the other on his jumpsuit. "Are you okay?"

The woman rearranged her dress—and replied with a slap across the face. "You fool! I had him right where I wanted him!" She yanked her card out of his hand and swore under her breath. With a mild yelp she kicked the injured assailant; he uttered a semi-conscious groan and curled tighter.

Eyes wide with surprise, Storm stumbled back a step or two and rubbed his offended cheek. His damsel in distress was young, probably in her twenties, judging by her porcelain features and full, black hair. Her skin wasn't toasted like everyone else's; it was naturally dark—a pleasant sight amidst a world of lower-class Earth transplants trying to survive in an unforgiving climate.

Realizing that he was staring, Storm blinked and looked around the alley. A few paces away were two cloth bags that had been dropped, their contents (groceries) spilling out onto the filthy ground.

"Why don't I get those for you?" he offered, trying to salvage any chance of friendship, however slim. He crouched, righted one of the bags, started picking things up.

The woman sighed and made to help as well. "Thank you, but I can take care of myself."

"Fine." Storm rose to his feet. "Sorry to interrupt you and your"—he glanced down at the sleeping assailant—"friend. Have a good one." He turned and started back the way he'd come, but halted when he heard the woman's voice calling out again:

"Wait—hold it there, blondie."

He stopped, faced her again.

"Since you *did* offer," she continued, "I could use an extra pair of arms. Don't squash the fruit."

Storm grinned despite the fact that the last remnants of his pride were smoldering. He wondered if he'd been subconsciously flexing his charisma. *Maybe she just has a thing for tweaked white boys. Probably an American export, judging by her accent.* She may or may not have been a legal resident, but that didn't matter much when they rounded up all the supposed bottom-feeders and shipped them

off. White, African, Hispanic, Asian—none of it mattered anymore once you were stuffed into a freight compartment en route to your new life on Sparrow. She might have been one of the unlucky economical blemishes, or she might have been a criminal. After spending ten years alone with oneself, anyone with a pulse was a sight for sore eyes. And this gal was very easy on the eyes. *And*, if things went right, he'd have a place to stay for the night.

"My name's Storm, by the way," he said, resuming the task of picking up fallen produce. "You know, you really shouldn't walk through these alleys alone."

"I usually don't," replied the woman, sliding a pineapple back into her bag. "Thought I'd slip by today, but wouldn't you know, this jerk happened to be thinking the same thing." She swore. "My name's Annah."

Storm smiled—this time intentionally tapping his supermodel aspect. "Do you live around here?"

"My, you're a nosy bugger, aren't you?"

"Sorry. Forget I asked." A friendly smile, a subtle fluttering of eyelashes.

"If you must know," Annah replied after a pause, "yes, I live the next grid over. Are you finished yet?"

Dropping the last of the apples into the bag, Storm hefted it and nodded. "Just."

Annah peered briefly into the bag, pretending to examine carefully the contents with a displeased look on her face (while she was really examining Storm—perhaps for hidden weapons, or perhaps simply to get an eyeful of his sleek template). "Well, I guess it could be worse. Don't you know to put the heavy things on bottom?"

"I'm usually a stickler when it comes to bagging groceries. The heat's got me all mixed up."

"You look like you could use a drink."

Storm caught himself staring again, diverted his eyes from Annah's legs and shrugged, trying to act like this was all a surprise to him when really he'd known by the second flash of her piercing eyes that she was taking more than a passing interest in him. He was certain she wasn't dating anyone—she was holding out, holding *on*. Not that he had any intention of sleeping with her just yet; it was merely his male instinct reactivated after laying dormant for so long that had him appreciating the evident attraction. Normally he didn't care that he looked scandalously good under even the worst conditions, but if, in this instance, it would get him food, lodging for the night, he would play the game.

"I wouldn't want to impose," he said.

"Oh, you've already imposed," Annah said. "The least I can do is have you help make lunch and explain why it is you spend your afternoons hanging out in dirty alleyways and rescuing damsels in distress."

Storm shrugged. "Just being a good neighbor."

"I doubt it." Annah turned and started walking. "Come on. And try not to squash—"

"The fruit. I know."

5. Annah's Abode

Annah's apartment was simple, built from the same dusty stone limbs that every other building was, though hers seemed to be a bit tidier. There was a single low-ceilinged room, with various rugs arranged on the bare floor; several pieces of furniture had been placed around a central table that had throw pillows gathered along its perimeter. The sleeping area was offset by a pair of rice paper screens. Toward the rear of the room was the stove and cooler. There was no toilet (Storm assumed the building had a communal washroom).

"Sit," Annah instructed on entering, gesturing at one of the wicker armchairs.

Storm complied, and once he was off his feet, the ache in his muscles revealed itself. He let out a barely-audible sigh—a moment's relief stifled since the Moon 3 rendezvous—though outwardly he disguised his fatigue by not leaning back in his chair, however much he wanted to (it was seductively cool in Annah's home). *Always important to maintain a tireless demeanor at all times, especially around strangers—even fetchingly-beautiful women—if I want to keep the upper hand.* More advice from DK.

"I have water, orange juice, some beer," said Annah as she was putting things away.

"Water's fine," Storm said.

She brought him a glass, which he downed all at once.

"Can I trust you to sit tight while I get out of this mess?" she said, brushing a hand over her torn dress.

Storm nodded, and she left him, then, disappearing into the faux-cherry blossom orchard depicted by one of the rice screens.

She spoke as she changed her clothes:

"So, Storm. What kind of name is that?"

"My dad's idea," he answered. "He always said it was because I was born during a thunderstorm, but I checked the weather records when I was nine, just out of curiosity."

The sound of running water. "Ulterior motive?"

Storm cleared his throat. "Well...yeah."

"What did your mother have to say about it?"

"She was never around much. 'Storm' was the name chosen by the man my father married."

A swish of cloth, a deft movement of painted rice paper, and Annah stood before him again. She was wearing a blue summer dress.

He wondered why she was so readily comfortable in his presence, able to strut

around barefoot and carefree. Maybe she was compensating for the trauma of her alleyway assault—or maybe it was simply too hot an afternoon to wear anything but the bare essentials. Again, he couldn't help appreciating her sturdy, shapely build—no doubt she could do some damage if he decided to run amok and ransack the place. Perhaps traversing the city via dark crevices was her means of drawing shifty men near for...what, exactly? Companionship? Confirmation of her own defensive skills? Storm himself was quite destitute at the moment; picking him up as a possible dinnertime beau would provide her with nothing more than a temporary guest.

Maybe, he thought, *like all the rest of us, she's simply lonely.*

"Two dads?"

Storm snapped out of his momentary mental tangent. "What?"

"Your parents," Annah said, retrieving a pitcher of water and a glass for herself. She sat across from Storm. "They were both male."

"I had *one* father. The other was just his lover. I never called him 'dad.'"

"Sorry if you don't want to talk about it."

"That's all right."

Annah poured him another glass of water, then one for herself. As he was sipping, she said, "So, how have you come to visit one of Great Hope's many fine ghettos?"

"Who says I'm visiting?"

"Well, you're certainly not one of Sparrow's aborigines, what with that blond hair and fair skin—and your teeth are too white and straight to make you an export."

Storm heard himself laughing dismissively. "My parents were vain as well as gay. They wanted their son to be aesthetically pleasing—an athlete or an entertainer. My template is a mixture of their favorite Olympic heroes and runway models."

"It sounds like you don't share their affinity for pretty packaging."

Storm shrugged. His father and Uncle Damien had been all about decadence. Storm had been their networking tool. As a model, he'd posed for commercial spreads, done a few immensely popular nude physique shoots. As an athlete, he'd earned a handful of medals and certificates at a variety of local and statewide competitions. As a son, he'd grown up surrounded by his parents' appreciation for their child-investment, which they showcased every chance they got. Hence the weekly penthouse pool parties, the beach barbecues—he'd been expected to market himself as a product, and he'd been expected to do it 24/7. It had not been uncommon for Damien and his guests, drinks in hand, to comment openly in his presence:

"*He'll be able to get any woman he likes. Hell, any man.*"

"*With a face like that, I wouldn't be surprised if he's already had his pick of the litter.*"

"*I'd kill for abs like his!*"

"*You'd kill for another cruller.*"

Sensing a personal reverie in his silence, Annah softened her expression

somewhat. “Hey, we’re just passing the time, right? Stuck in the same boat and all that. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No worries.”

“Still, why *are* you visiting Great Hope?”

Storm sighed, set his glass on the table. “It’s a wrong place at the wrong time kind of thing.”

“Let me guess,” Annah said. “You’re on the run from the police.”

Storm grinned, shrugged. *Strike one.*

“You came here to lay low for a while, maybe get a little help from me in figuring out what to do after the heat is off.”

Strike two.

“Would it scare you if I said you were mostly right?” Storm asked, hoping his expression was reasonably playful—as opposed to creepy-stalker-happy.

Annah shrugged. “That depends on what you did.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Besides, I don’t like to dump my problems on others.”

“I’ve been surviving on this dank, corrupted rock since I was sixteen. I think I can handle a bit of absurdity from the likes of you.”

Strike three. Put out or get out.

Storm squirmed. Usually *he* was the one who did the manipulating! Annah waited (with every bit of confidence that he would open up to her without further prodding). It was insane, it was ridiculous—

—it was working.

She had not spoken obstinately. She was sincerely interested, firm in her persuasion, and probably able to handle any flaky yarn he could have thrown at her. He always hated it when anyone tried to gain insight into what he was thinking, but now, in this room, on this planet—in this time stream—there was no doubt that he’d stumbled upon quite an interesting situation. No one else he’d ever met (recently, at least) had said to him, in complete silence, without speech, “You can trust me, as long as I can trust you.” And she didn’t just ask for trust, she demanded it.

His tongue loosened a bit and he cleared his throat. “I’ll start with a hint, then.” Why not, right? She’d never believe him anyway. “I was born on Earth, in 2279. November 10th, if I can remember correctly.”

He expected a twitch of surprise, a straightening of Annah’s spine, a skeptical glance, but certainly not what he got now: a mere shrug—as if chasers trotted past her doorstep on a regular basis.

“So you’re a chaser, a streamer, a time-junkie,” she said, “and a Scorpio, too. That still doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“You’re not the least bit surprised?”

“Meeting one of you fellows isn’t as uncommon as you would have me believe.”

Storm thought for a moment, bit his lip. “How do you know I’m telling the truth?”

At this, Annah leaned forward. “Look me in the eye and tell me you’re lying.”

Immediately, he felt all his control slip away, and he was both outraged and exulted. It seemed everything he threw in her direction she threw back with equal force. Nevertheless, he kept a straight face. "I'm not lying."

Annah let up slightly, gazed past Storm and out the window. "You *do* know you're not safe here. The police have been patrolling the city more frequently as of late. You're most likely on their list."

Storm nodded. "I'm sure of it. I probably should have died forty-something years ago. The government doesn't like when people find out how to cheat."

"So...is that what you're doing? Cheating? Playing hooky from your birth stream?"

"No. And I'm not out to screw around with the Standards either. It's all temporary—I hope—until I can get back."

"Back where?"

"Where, or, actually, *when* I belong."

A look of confusion crossed Annah's face. "But if you went through all the trouble of escaping from your birth stream, why do you want to go back?"

Storm snorted. "First off, I didn't *escape* my stream. That's for reincarnates and New-Agers who want to become immortal and rule their own little planet or something. Immortality has its perks, but I got kicked out on accident. Something to do with two temporal layers becoming misaligned at the very instant I was doing some leisure streaming at a time mall."

"I remember those," Annah said, half-smiling.

Nodding, Storm continued: "I got screwed. Could have wound up deader than dead, but the failsafe dumped me back into Standard—a couple of years offtrack. Everyone thought I did it on purpose. I mean, no one survives a glitch like that except, maybe, one in a million. One in a hundred million. I did, and so it was obvious that I was an ornery chaser bent on unraveling the galactic commerce. Failing that, I was just an unlucky bastard who'd accidentally stumbled on mankind's clever little secret. The Time Patrol wants us to believe that we're made for the typical 70-120 year lifespan, so the majority of us live and die quietly, packed away in the Standard timeline while the elite choose their incarnations at their own leisure. It's like...a highway. You've got all these cars crammed in one direction, but it's not the only road to wherever you're going. Get yourself a good map and you can go anywhere, but if you don't know anywhere else to go, you're just stuck. Birth, life, death."

"Conspiracy theory's the game, huh?" Annah murmured.

"Who doesn't have a conspiracy theory? Look at all the wealthy aristocrats who spend millions to have their birth certificates secluded. The politicians who hire astrologers as bodyguards. Everyone's afraid that if the government doesn't like something they're doing, their stream will be deleted from the galaxy. 'Stardom kills,' don't you know?"

"Unless you escape your birth stream."

Storm nodded. "They can only tamper with your past when you're in Standard. Once you jump off it, you're untouchable until you return at the exact

point you left."

"That's fine and dandy," Annah persisted, "but if being 'stuck' in Standard's such a bad thing, why do you want to go back?"

"Unfinished business," sighed Storm. Trudie's face flashed in his mind once again. "I left before I wanted to, and stayed away out of necessity. There are people I really care about."

"But you'll get caught."

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's still a matter of tracking me down. And maybe, if I can teach my friends the truth, take them off Standard...who knows?"

Storm became quiet for a moment, contemplating. *I'm not there yet, and it's going to be awhile before I am. Even then, there's no guarantee any of my old pals will want to see me. Not with a bounty hanging over my head. And who's to say if they'll want to leave Standard?*

"Naturally," said Annah, standing, "you'll need a place to stay for the night, and a bath, and possibly directions around the city."

"Are you offering?"

"I'm a sucker for storytellers."

"As long as it's not any trouble."

Annah waved him down. "Shush. Don't talk yourself out of the deal."

"Okay, then," said Storm.

6. Exit

White, windowless walls, bright lights, and a distinctly metallic odor comprised what was informally known among Patrolmen as the "VIP Lounge." In its center, a large featureless chair with a high back was occupied by a newly-acquired prisoner who sat with his head slumped forward, his arms and legs bound by heavy straps. He'd already been searched thoroughly, and the entirety of his belongings had been examined by a tall, well-built man apparently in his late forties.

"Christopher Eklund, born February 26, 2366, Human Standard Calendar. Aries Minor transplant, 26X-3. Has held a number of odd jobs, though nothing on record for at least the last decade. Current status: independent trader, unmarried, identification number IT-1372-447819." The foreman turned to face the three Patrol officers who stood at attention beside the chair. He held up the ID tag. "This was all he was carrying on him?"

"Yes, sir. He was unarmed."

"He was alone?"

"Yes, sir. However, additional units have been deployed and are still searching the surrounding area."

The foreman nodded. "Continue monitoring all gates to the city, and begin a door-to-door search starting with the lower-class units."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, please, send in the good doctor—and turn off the cameras."

* * *

The first thing Chris felt when he opened his eyes was the tingling numbness in his right arm. He focused his gaze, found himself staring into the hawkish face of Foreman Daniel Ketch.

I'll be damned, he thought, taking in the foreman's features. *Hasn't aged a day in ten years.* Ketch still had a mane of brilliant white hair tied back in a tail, still had the powerful bone structure to his face and jaw that gave him the appearance of a subtle beast. The warm, hospitable smile on his face was in stark contrast to the rest of him.

Chris groaned inside, feeling an age-old apathy rear its head.

"Ah," murmured Ketch, signaling for the medic to step back and allow him space. "Mr. Eklund has decided to join us."

"Danny, my boy," Chris muttered groggily, rolling his head back and forth in an attempt to examine his bound arms. "Just the...way I like them: tight and

confining." He was having trouble forming his words; whatever drug he'd been given was keeping his brain from interacting correctly with the rest of his body. "You still know how to treat your...guests."

From the medic: "Foreman Ketch, shall I administer more stimulant?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Please, leave us now. I'll call for you if any further assistance is required."

"Yes, sir." The doctor quickly replaced his collection of needles in his bag and left the room.

As Chris tried, rather uselessly, to regain his composure (he was unable to keep his head level, his eyes going in and out of focus—yet his brain was running a mile a minute), the foreman strode placidly around the chair with his hands clasped behind his back. "One of the benefits of being immortal is that those who are still unenlightened give you respect. After all, no one wants a rival who will remain alive and in perfect health indefinitely, someone who will always be vital and alert while you, on the other hand, gradually become weak and brittle with time. And from the look of you, my friend, time has been ever-vigilant, planting more and more gray hairs every year, chiseling the wrinkles deeper and deeper. You see, you haven't learned, Christopher."

"Look who's talking," Chris scoffed. "Looks to me like...you haven't learned a thing either. Not after ten years, not after a hundred. Still have to...face your victims while they're tied up. Helpless."

Ketch stopped pacing and leaned over Chris's bridled form. "You should have come clean the last time we met, Mr. Eklund. Maybe then you could have regained your life, lived out your final years with your family instead of in the loneliness of space. Yes, Christopher. I've been keeping tabs on your little family life. Claire, the children, tucked away for safekeeping from the big, bad Patrol."

"You leave them...alone," mumbled Chris. "A self-absorbed bureaucrat like you has no business pushing around...innocents like chess pieces. Your beef is with me."

Standing again, Ketch shook his head and sighed. "You really don't have a clue, do you? You think my sole purpose of being, the existence of the Patrol, the discovery of time streaming is to keep the galaxy muzzled—but you couldn't be further from the truth."

"Bah," grumbled Chris, wishing he could spit right about now. "We both know you're full of...crap."

"Tsk-tsk. Good old Mr. Eklund, sharp-tongued until the very end. And this *will* be the end, you know. You have just about outlived your usefulness. I will be patient with you no more. It is people like you who have kept the Patrol's efforts from affecting the kind of change our galaxy needs to properly flourish—"

"—into a...universal zoo..."

"A universal *humanity*," Ketch shot back, facing Chris again. "It's been nearly three centuries since humans built the first space vessels capable of faster-than-light travel and settled our overpopulated billions onto the precious few terrestrial bodies able to support life. Even then, it's been an uphill battle, as there is not an

alien presence nor savage microbe that does not want to see our race dwindle and perish. So we've fought the odds, sacrificed our brethren in the name of colonization and order. For three hundred years we've worked to make a place for ourselves amongst the stars, and what do we have to show for it? Entire planets reeking of famine, war with the Centaurians, human pestilence still rampaging unconquered. Millions of lives are born while even more millions die needlessly. There is waste, so much *waste*, and the rest of the galaxy isn't going to wait much longer for us to mature before they take matters into their own hands.

"You don't need to be reminded, though. You've seen the brutality of the Outer Wars, the leagues of human soldiers lined up along the perimeters of every star base, fighting to protect the civilian lives within. Every year our defensive borders recede just a bit. A few casualties here, a lost fighter ship there, but over time, it builds up, Christopher. Slowly, but surely, the human race is being evaporated.

"Even here on Sparrow, anti-human factions are growing by the minute. It's only a matter of time before they start ridding themselves of the 'human infestation.' The aborigines are taking our young and turning them against us with promises of fortune and glory—promises that are not in the least intended to be fulfilled. The only way to regain any sort of footing amongst these countless other species who've supposedly evolved past us is to begin an evolution of our own. The first step is to make ourselves stronger. That means discipline: control over our species, control over our science, control over our own destinies."

Ketch spoke with such passion, such conviction that, had he not been previously introduced, Chris would have handed over the keys to his cruiser and the deed to his home that very minute. Here was a man who believed in every decision he'd ever made; he truly knew that his point of view was unbreakable. It was simultaneously inspiring and terrifying.

"Control," Chris said, after a time. "You mean...make those who catch your fancy immortal and those who don't...obsolete. Nourish the healthy, pull out the weeds. Unnatural selection. You think I haven't heard the stories of...peasant families suddenly disappearing, children never being born because...the government deems them expendable? Each and every person you kill, they each have a soul...they each have a life, maybe not up to your standards...but it's theirs, not yours. You're playing God."

Ketch's face darkened somewhat; his fists clenched behind his back. "Every tribe needs a chief, Mr. Eklund. But it is obvious my explanations are being wasted on you. I thought somehow a man who has managed to evade my forces for *ten years*, might have come to realize his purpose, *our* purpose in this galaxy. I can see now I was wrong. You are nothing more than an insignificant speck, shuttling back and forth through space and selling your little trinkets until death comes to rob you of even that. But perhaps there is one final way to redeem yourself."

"Get to...the point, Ketch. If I'm going to die, I sure as hell don't want it to be during a lecture from you."

The foreman stood before him and, with both hands, took hold of Chris's drooping head, making him face forward. "Where is Storm Anderson?"

Chris tried to snicker, but managed only a mild snort. “Luckily for...him, I don’t know.”

Ketch’s expression turned frigid. He tightened his grip on Chris’s head, moving his thumbs down to the temples and squeezing hard. “Where is he?”

“Fuck...you,” Chris replied, stifling a yelp of pain as he suddenly went cross-eyed.

“Indeed,” Ketch replied, not letting go of Chris’s head until his fingers had broken the skin. “No matter, though. I can always get what I need out of you through the use of our mind probes and drugs. After that, it’s only a matter of time.”

Chris slouched, his vision gone, his head throbbing with excruciating pain. He heard Ketch’s exit—no doubt he was going to get the doctor for further probing—and he knew he would never see the light of day again. However, he was not frightened, for he knew the truth. He was not a chaser, he’d never taken the final, definitive step into freedom, but through Storm he’d gotten a glimpse of the other side, a taste of what lay in wait, and that was enough...to know that he would never truly be dead, even if his body was.

He manifested an image of Claire and the children in his mind, and their smiling faces were all the comfort in the universe.

7. Sparrow Moon

Sparrow's artificial moon shimmered high above the city of Great Hope. With the curtain pulled slightly open, Storm lay in his makeshift bed beside the window and watched the sky. Even though he was exhausted from the labors of the day (he'd spent the waning hours of the afternoon doing handyman work for Annah—payback for dinner, a shower, a place to sleep), he couldn't find sleep. So, he simply allowed his gaze to wander here and there, eventually settling on Annah, sleeping on her cot against the rear wall. Every so often he would squirm underneath his blanket, pulling at the pants she'd given him to wear, for they were a bit too small (his jumpsuit had been washed and was hanging to dry)—but he couldn't complain. He had shelter for the night, and company on a planet full of strangers. That was always the hard part of interplanetary travel, especially if you were alone: the culture shock was formidable. In many places, no human languages were spoken whatsoever—

"Are you still awake?"

Storm blinked. Annah was now leaning on one arm and facing in his direction.

"Yeah," he responded.

"I'd have thought you would be dog-tired after all the work you did today. Unless you immortal types don't need sleep?"

"Nervous energy."

A pause from Annah, then a soft murmur as she sat up and swung her legs over the side of her cot. "We can go for a walk. It's much cooler outside during the night. I know a place, if you're up for it."

"Why not?" Storm replied, reaching for his boots.

"No," Annah instructed. "Leave them here. You'll make less noise without them."

A moment of consideration, then a shrug as he realized she was probably right. "Lead the way," he said.

* * *

The night air was refreshingly cool as they, Storm barefoot and bare-chested, Annah in her nightgown, traversed the narrow alley that perforated a seemingly infinite stretch of multi-story residential buildings. There was plenty of moonlight (most modernized planets had at least one artificial satellite, the idea being that less crimes are committed when there are fewer shadows in which to hide), and Annah seemed to know her way—which was good, because the last thing Storm needed

was a bloody foot or broken neck while bumbling about in the dark behind some random pawn shop or watering hole.

They spoke on and off in hushed tones. Storm was amazed at how comfortable the conversation was. He felt like they were old friends catching up after a long separation—except he was sure he'd never met her until yesterday afternoon. And yet...

Eventually they came to a tall wall overgrown with vines.

"See?" Annah whispered, pointing to the base of the wall, where an evident stain marked the presence of subterranean moisture. "A gardener's shop, on the other side." She started up.

"What about security?" Storm asked, following suit.

"He can't afford any."

Storm took her word for it, scaling the wall and dropping down silently onto the grass on the other side. He paused momentarily, adjusting to the sight of patchwork flower beds and meticulously trimmed hedges, all laid out across a large yard—a tea garden. Polished stone fountains, connected by a network of miniature ravines, presided throughout, while sentinel palms stood along the perimeter.

"Come," Annah said, and led him to a spot near the center, where a quartet of fig trees shaded a shallow mound. Annah lay on her back so that she could stargaze; Storm, feeling not quite as comfortable being in a stranger's yard, sat with one knee lifted, the other tucked against the grass. It didn't look like anyone was up and about, but he was prepared to make a quick exit nonetheless.

After a few minutes of shared silence, Annah rolled onto her side. "What are you thinking about?" she asked softly.

Storm looked at her. Under the moonlight, she took on the appearance of a golden-skinned angel and not a forthright ghetto girl trying to keep her head up amidst Great Hope's peasantry. There was something else, too. An elusive familiarity that hovered about her like a pleasant perfume.

"Nothing. Everything," he replied after a moment.

"Contradiction—another habit of the immortals?"

Storm smiled. "No, just mine. Too restless for my own good, I guess."

Annah moved beside him now, leaning her head against his shoulder. He resisted the temptation to return the embrace. He could feel the heat from her body, feel her quickened pulse. She was no doubt responding, consciously or otherwise, to the exaggerated masculinity of his template. Or perhaps she'd simply been without a man for too long. He'd certainly been without a woman—but now wasn't the time. Trudie was his, and she was waiting for him. Besides, experience had taught him not to accept affection for the sake of accepting affection. Most men with his allure would be perfectly fine working their way through year after year of one-night stands, but Storm couldn't help falling in love hard, and out of love even harder.

"So?"

Storm blinked, met Annah's inquisitive gaze. "Pardon?"

"So, how does Storm Anderson go from being an everyday guy to being a time

chaser on the run?"

"A little time and motion..." He trailed off, the myriad memories taking him across multiple lifetimes. "Biologically, you become a chaser the moment you leave your birth stream. Without that signature force of gravity, your DNA no longer knows which 'direction' to unwind, and so it simply resets itself to the default setting."

"Just like that? You're joking."

"Well, the scientific explanation is much more eloquent, I'm sure, but I always liked the clock analogy. All our cells are like pre-wound analog clocks, slowly winding down in sync with the pull of our birth stream—but if you leave your stream, your 'clock' is no longer able to keep the proper time. I don't think you actually become *infinite*, but the aging process is much, much slower."

Annah flexed her fingers, gazed at the back of her hand. "I used to wonder what it would be like, you know, to live forever. Like a chaser." She looked up at Storm once again. "I could never do it. Living in constant limbo, never knowing where I'll end up. I mean, even with death, there's a certainty. You know you're in God's hands after you die. But to know that you'll *never* die, that you'll never make it to what's next..."

Storm felt her hand slip into his own. *Less physical affection, now. More the type of thing you get from someone who wants to believe in someone like me. Am I supposed to preach to her now? Lecture her? Comfort her?* "Look at that," he said, and tilted her face upward, toward the night sky. A few of the brighter stars managed to beat the light pollution. "So much space, still expanding, never-ending. An eternity."

Annah snickered. "Did you memorize that from some random advertisement?"

"Nothing gets past you," Storm replied, listening to the subdued sounds of crickets chirping, water trickling. Farther off: a dog barking, sirens wailing in the distance.

"Yeah..." Annah breathed. Then, in a whisper that was almost inaudible: "Except you."

Storm looked at her. "What?"

"Nothing—"

"No, I heard you say—"

"Storm, it's nothing."

He shifted slightly, held Annah by the shoulders. When she refused to meet his gaze, he said, "I *thought* when we first met there was a familiarity."

Eyes still downcast, Annah murmured, "Coincidence."

"No, we've met before—or we're *going* to meet, is that it?"

She fell silent for a moment, then rose to her feet, holding herself with both arms. "I'm so bad at this. I mean, here I am acting like a lovesick teenager when I should be sticking to the plan."

"What plan?" Storm asked, suddenly alarmed. He stood as well, legs tensed.

Annah smiled reassuringly. "Calm down. I'm not an undercover agent or a fundamentalist or anything like that." She looked up at the sky again. "You came to me once before asking for help. You told me to wait in the alley on a specific date at

a specific time. You said when I met you again that I should pretend I don't know you."

Despite his apprehension, Storm found himself intrigued. "How do I know you're telling the truth?" he asked.

"Because," she answered, "I know your story."

8. Flashback

Same body, previous life: The taxi dropped Storm off in front of the East Cedar Time Mall at a quarter after seven in the evening. He paid the driver and then strode inside, where high, arched ceilings with ornate patterns carved into them helped disguise the dozens of security cameras watching silently for any signs of trouble. Patronage was abundant, evidenced by the dozens of people milling about, either finishing with their own streams or preparing to embark on new ones. Most were teenagers or young adults out to re-live the highlights of their burgeoning social lives. Others were over-forties wanting to turn back the clock for a reasonable fee. The rest were of Storm's ilk: those who simply found streaming to be *fun*, those whose social lives weren't over-developed enough to warrant a preference for the present over the past.

Storm found his regular booth at the heart of the mall. He entered, pulled the curtain closed. He inserted his bank card into the payment slot and punched in the code for a stream that ran about a month before, an enjoyable night on which Trudie, Jason, and himself had been playing poker. After a moment's pause, the information screen flickered at him and the usual message flashed: THANK YOU FOR YOUR PURCHASE OF EAST CEDAR TIME. EAST CEDAR: GIVING YOU QUALITY STREAMS FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS. YOU MAY NOW TAKE THE HELM.

For those who were new to streaming, there were diagrams posted all over the interior of the booth that showed you how you were supposed to sit in the chair, operate the controls, and so forth. Storm had been streaming ever since the third grade, and took the helm without concern. Once the seat had adjusted itself around him, the lights dimmed and a soft hum filled the booth as the brilliant colors and swirling patterns (a popular pyrotechnics trick) of the time stream transported him from now to then.

Even without the eye candy, the process was quite exhilarating. As such, Storm wasn't paying attention when his peripheral vision started to warp and become distorted. Only when he felt himself lurch violently did he let loose a terrified scream. Vertigo washed over him with tidal strength. He was falling forward, through the curtain, the floor, the ground beneath; everything was immaterial, vaporous—

—loose atoms scattered across time and space.

At least, that's what it felt like. He lost all sense of physicality, his arms, his legs, his entire body now nothing more than a mental fragment—and yet his mind was still somehow going a mile a minute: *You're screwed. Oh, boy are you screwed! This*

shouldn't even be possible! Of course it's not! It's all in your mind, your steaming, bubbling brain matter splattered all over the time booth walls because some lazy-ass East Cedar employee forgot to check the equipment—

—and then as quickly as he'd been torn apart, Storm was reassembled, stuffed haphazardly back into flesh, muscle, bone, teeth, hair as he was assaulted by concrete—a sidewalk. For a few seconds, he felt as if static electricity was raising every hair on his body, then it was over and he was left alone with his breath coming in ragged gasps, his heart pumping madly. It took him several minutes to regain proper control of himself. He lifted his head from the ground to find he was lying on a street corner in the residential section of town, not far from his apartment, actually.

This was, of course, impossible.

He staggered to his feet and found that while he was scratched up somewhat from falling onto the hard concrete, he was otherwise none the worse for wear. Extremely lucky, actually, that he wasn't dead, and only a few blocks off the mark, considering some of the theoretical errors that could occur during a time stream. He tried to think back to when he'd first entered the booth at the mall and entered his code. He hadn't put in the wrong number, had he? Even if he had, normally, whenever you entered a stream code, there were security measures set up to make sure no mistakes were made. Otherwise, you could end up a thousand years behind and a million miles away.

So what had gone wrong? He'd heard stories on the news and in magazines that not all time codes were protected by the security function, and sometimes different streams got crossed, but it was all rumor and gossip. At least, that's what he wanted to believe despite the fact that he was standing all alone on an empty city street at night.

The evening air was chill, and he was in no mood to be standing around waiting for a quantum physicist to waltz by with the answers. He started walking quickly toward home. He had no idea what time it was. There weren't many people out. Those who were passed in shuttles and paid him no more attention than they'd offer a pedestrian or vagrant.

A ten-minute walk brought him to his apartment building. It was here he discovered that his wallet was missing—likely left back at East Cedar. He jumped the fence, crept up the stairs, and entered as quietly as he could, only half-noticing in the back of his mind that the walls of the hallway were painted light blue instead of white. He found his door and tried the knob, but of course he'd locked it before he'd left, and now he had no key card.

Okay. Plan B. Wake Jason. Explain what's happened. Try not to sound like a whacko while doing it.

Jason was Storm's best friend. The two of them had grown up together, had gone to the same schools, had even moved into the same apartment complex after college (Jason had moved in first, and had later wooed Storm for the referral bonus). If he was to turn up on anyone's doorstep tonight, he'd rather it be Jason's.

Storm took the elevator up to Jason's floor—and collided with an elderly

woman pushing a laundry basket and trying to get *onto* the elevator just as Storm was distractedly trying to get *off*. Storm sprawled onto the floor, knocking over both woman and basket in the process.

"I'm *so* sorry," he gasped, wasting no time in getting back on his feet, offering the woman a hand. "Are you okay?"

"My goodness!" the woman said, more in awe of Storm's tempered physique than out of surprise at being bowled over unexpectedly. "You're a nice surprise, aren't you?"

Running with the first stupid explanation to cross his mind, Storm replied, "Forgot to do my laundry in time for work tomorrow." He nodded at the overturned basket. "You know how it is."

"I know that you'd look and smell better in dirty clothes than I would in clean ones."

Storm blushed. "Um...thanks."

Whether or not the woman believed his story, she seemed perfectly okay letting him help her up, and made no pretense of hiding her delight as she watched him bend over to right her basket. Task completed, he turned to bid a quick goodbye—and found himself being handed a payment card.

"There's ten units left on there," the woman said, pressing the card into his hand. "I was going to waste it on Chinese takeout and a movie download, but I'd much rather spend it on you." She patted him on the backside, savored his musculature a moment, and then, pushing her basket, exited the corridor with a pleased expression on her face.

Storm held up the payment card.

Huh.

He made it the rest of the way to Jason's door without incident and rang the buzzer impatiently, glancing up and down the hall and hoping nobody else came along until he was safely inside—as if his mere presence advertised the mishap at East Cedar. Momentarily, there came a click from the small intercom screen beside the door, and Jason's voice, thick with sleep, rasped through.

"*Who is it?*"

Storm noted offhandedly that Jason wasn't using the screen, only audio. "Jason, it's me!"

"*Me who?*"

"It's Storm! Get your rear out of bed and let me in!"

A pause, followed by, "*Jesus Christ! Okay, hold on—I mean, don't go anywhere. Oh, geez...*"

Within seconds, Jason (bleary-eyed and bedraggled) was opening the front door.

Immediately, Storm rushed in.

"Close the door, it's friggin' cold out there," he said, rubbing his shoulders with his hands and becoming silent as he looked around his friend's apartment. "You've redecorated."

Jason didn't answer. He simply stood and stared in what was evidently total

disbelief. "Storm—I can't believe it's you. Where have you *been*?"

Storm turned, faced his friend—and for the first time really *saw* him, saw how he'd changed. The only light was from the kitchen nook, where the dim, blue-hued overhead that ran around the cooking range shone into the living room. It looked like Jason had cut his hair really short and dyed it blond, and he had a goatee. His normally fair skin appeared tanned, and he was considerably more muscular than before, as if he'd been vigilantly working out for months to get a shape he didn't have yesterday.

"How did you get here?" Jason asked, stepping forward (and more into the light). "And what's that?"

Storm held up the money paid to him by the woman in the hall. "Ten units."

"Okay, that doesn't explain anything."

Storm swallowed and furrowed his brow. "I...I don't know. I was at the mall, in one of the booths. Something happened during the stream, and I found myself out on the street, a few blocks from here."

"The time mall..." echoed Jason, sudden realization coming over his face. "East Cedar, right? The accident—my God, do you know what the date is?"

"The date?"

"March 16, 2306."

"*2306*?" Storm trailed off, suddenly overwhelmed. He felt his gut tighten. "That's nuts. I mean...there's no way..."

Jason shook his head and put a hand on Storm's shoulder. "You've been gone for almost two years. There was a piece on the news about you, and the mall got in serious trouble for letting an accident like that happen. It's been closed ever since, and you haven't been seen or heard from in, well, until now. I thought...we *all* thought you were dead."

With a shiver running through him, Storm allowed his friend a brief hug. *This can't be happening,* he thought. *It's part of the stream. In about forty-five minutes my time will be up, and I'll be back in the mall.* It was a naïve fake-out, he knew it—especially since he'd never lived anything like this before. Even if he had, this wasn't the stream he'd input earlier. Somehow, crazy as it was, he'd traveled *forward* in time during his visit to the mall.

"What's going on?" came a woman's voice from the bedroom doorway. Storm let go of Jason and turned to see someone he didn't recognize entering the living room. She adjusted her robe and fussed with her hair, paid a curious glance in Storm's direction. "Baby, who...?"

"He's a friend," Jason explained.

The woman yawned. "I'm Shianne. You, um, want anything to drink?"

Storm shook his head. "No thanks."

"Well, I'm parched." Still half asleep, and unenlightened to the situation, Shianne seemed amused by Storm's presence as she moved beside him and rummaged in the cooler. "Are you hungry?"

Storm shook his head again. "No, I'm fine. Just a little...disoriented."

Shianne withdrew a bottle of water, closed the cooler, twisted the cap off the

bottle and took a swig. She leaned against the counter and fixed both Storm and Jason with a questioning stare. "Well? Is there a story behind the random supermodel dude standing in our kitchen, or should I just wait for the news to hit the Internet in the morning?"

Jason blinked, hardly able to take his eyes off Storm—as if his friend might suddenly vanish again at any moment. "Storm, this is my wife, Shianne. Shianne, this is Storm."

"Wife?" Storm blurted out. He'd been speculating about a possible girlfriend, but a *wife*? The obvious question came next: "You're married?"

Glancing over at Shianne, Jason half smiled, half blushed. "Yeah. I met her a few months after you, er, left. We got married this year."

"Not that we rushed into it or anything," Shianne said, smirking.

Storm watched the shadows thoughtfully. "I suppose my place has been rented out to someone else by now?"

"Uh, yeah..." responded Jason, a nervous look coming over his face. He sat at the table, beckoning for Shianne to do the same. When he spoke, he leaned in close, as if there might be someone listening to the conversation. "The police found your ID at the mall. They came down here and turned your place upside down looking for I don't know what. The Time Patrol came and did the same thing. The guy in charge—real creepy dude, looks like a humanoid hawk—he came and questioned all of us. And not just the basics. He had me talking about when you and I were kids—he wanted to know it all. When he left, he and the Patrol took everything in your apartment with them. Said they had to analyze it or something, supposedly to search for clues to your disappearance. They even contacted your mom and all your friends to question them as well. It was a really big deal, you know, and it will be again once they hear you've suddenly returned."

"I'll say," said Storm. "The whole thing took mere seconds for me, and during that time two *years* flew past."

Jason nodded, his tone becoming more subdued. "You know, they haven't ruled out the possibility of stream-breaking. A fair amount of people I know think you did it on purpose to escape your birth stream. You know, time chaser stuff."

Storm scowled. "That's ridiculous. How could I have...one minute I was sitting in the chair, minding my own business, and the next I was, well, here!"

"Yeah, but..." Jason trailed off, looked at Shianne (who was quite bug-eyed by now), then back at Storm again. He shrugged helplessly. "When things like this happen, people don't come back, Storm. They just don't. But you did."

"So, you're saying I somehow planned this? I somehow managed to pull together two years of community college for public shuttle repair and turned it into cutting-edge streaming know-how?"

"Hey, I didn't say that was what *I* thought," replied Jason, holding up his hands. "I totally believe you were involved in an accident. Those time booths aren't infallible, you know. Trouble is, when something like this happens, it's always sudden death for the person involved. The only way to survive a streaming accident is to know what you're doing. Like, um, a chaser or whatever."

Storm folded his hands, watched the streetlights through the kitchen window. "So, I'm a chaser now, huh? Is that what they all think? They want to throw me in prison for having an *accident*?"

"Maybe," said Jason, sighing. "The Patrol's real tough. They have heavy punishments for people who break the law. Illegally romping off for a joy ride into the future is worse than going on one into the past. I suppose they're afraid of people predicting what's going to happen, messing with probability. In the past, it's already happened and can't be changed, so they don't mind as much. Well, they still *mind*, but I guess you get a shorter prison sentence or something."

Briefly, Storm glanced at Jason's hand and saw a wedding ring glittering; Shianne had a similar one on hers. "What about Trudie?"

Jason's face paled somewhat as he nodded. "She's fine. Lives over near the college now. We can go and see her in the morning, if you like."

"No, I want to go now," Storm insisted. "If that's all right?"

"Uh, yeah. Hang on a second while I get dressed and give Jamie a kiss."

As everyone rose from the table, Storm looked toward the bedroom doorway. "Who's Jamie?" he asked.

"Oh. He's our son," Jason responded.

His son! "Is there anything else I should know?"

The uncomfortable look returned to Jason's face. "Uh, well, maybe you should speak with Trudie first. Wait here, I'll only be a minute."

9. Reality Glitch

They reached Trudie's place, a single-story duplex fenced off by well-trimmed hedges, a half-hour later. Storm approached confidently enough, though every step he took brought an increasing sense of dread. He knew he needed to see Trudie, to make sure she was all right, to tell her he was all right. And yet, there was something he was afraid of finding out, something he'd seen in Jason's eyes despite his repeated assurances.

"The door to the left," Jason said when Storm paused for a moment on the stoop. He rang the intercom and waited. Counting the seconds, he reached out to ring again when the intercom clicked.

"Who's there?" came an unfamiliar voice.

"It's Storm. I'm here to see Trudie."

"Who?"

Jason stepped forward. "Jane, it's me, Jason. I'm with...a friend."

A slender woman in her early twenties, wearing a long night gown and bunny slippers, opened the door and ushered them inside. It was obvious a plant-lover lived here; arranged in a row along the hall walls were tiny bowls holding a variety of ferns that served as an extension of the flowery wallpaper.

Jane locked the front door and turned to face her guests. Mildly annoyed: "You know, you could've called ahead."

"You weren't answering your phone," Jason said. "Neither was Trudie."

"Maybe that's because it's *the middle of the night*."

Jason waved his hand dismissively. "Do you remember about two years ago when East Cedar had that accident and lost a customer? Jane, this is him. This is Storm Anderson."

Jane's eyes went wide as recognition dawned. "Oh my God! Storm! *Trudie's* Storm! Everyone thought you were dead!"

"So I've heard," muttered Storm, crossing his arms.

"That's so freaky!" Jane reached out and touched his arm. "Wait until everyone hears about this. There'll be reporters, interviews, movies..."

Storm cringed, looking away.

"Apparently, it was a streaming accident," Jason offered, crossing his arms. "Nobody knows about this but us, and I'm not sure if coming right out with it is the best thing. You know the laws for breaking a stream."

"Oh, that's right. But he didn't do it on purpose...did he?"

Jason sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "No, he didn't. Tell her what happened, Storm."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore, I—" Storm paused, gaze caught in the doorway to the adjoining room. "—Trudie."

"Storm." Trudie, in her wheelchair, approached Storm with an oddly tranquil expression on her face. She was exactly the same as she'd been two days—two *years*—ago, with the same killer girl-next-door features and trim, powerful, curvaceous template—but she was immobile, frozen from the waist down. "Storm, is it really you?"

He didn't say anything as he dropped to his knees beside the chair, placing his hand over hers. "What the hell happened to you?"

"What the hell happened to *you*?"

"Please, tell me this is some kind of joke."

Trudie hugged him. "Not so much."

Storm held her at arm's length. "Really. What's the deal?"

"An accident, fate, chance," Trudie said, shrugging. "When you disappeared I was called in for questioning. The shuttle I took...it didn't quite make it. The doctors said it could've been much worse, considering." She patted her flat tummy, pinched one toned leg. "Funnily enough, my template still works. I just can't *move* half the parts."

Storm wanted to cry. Disbelief reflected in his eyes—along with the threat of tears, though he kept them hidden well. He could not, however, hide the shock and alienation his expression was no doubt betraying, and so he abruptly stood and headed for the door.

"Storm..." Jason began.

He wasn't listening.

* * *

Storm was leaning against the side of the shuttle when Jason found him, fresh tears streaking his cheeks.

"Dude, are you okay?" Jason asked.

"No."

"It's not as bad as it seems."

"I've missed two years of my life. My apartment's been cleared out. My girlfriend is in a wheelchair. I've been branded a chaser."

Jason put a hand on Storm's shoulder. "You're still alive. Trudie's still alive. And you haven't been branded anything. We'll work it out. You're home now."

Storm turned to face his friend, wiping his arm across his cheek. He had the look of a frightened animal, cornered, caught. "This isn't home. I don't belong here. It's not supposed to be like this. I can't stay."

"What do you mean?"

"I need to get back. Somehow...I have to get back to the right time, and you have to help me."

Shaking his head, Jason folded his arms. "*This* is the right time. This is the *only* time. Things are the way they are, and you can't just change them on a whim. It's

illegal."

"Things have already been changed. I wasn't supposed to skip out on a whim just to end up handicapping my girlfriend and alienating my family, my friends."

"Dude, you showed up on my doorstep out of the blue," Jason said, "and as far as I can tell, I'm still your friend. Trudie got in an accident. It's no one's fault. Even if you *had* stayed she could've gotten hurt some other way. Or maybe not at all. Or maybe *you* would've been the one to end up in a wheelchair." He paused a moment, glanced back at the duplex. "The entire time you were gone, she never stopped talking about you. She never got with anyone else. It's always been you or no one at all. Leaving now is out of the question."

Storm bit his lip and looked down the street, away from Jason. "I could have prevented it."

"You had no way of knowing. None of us did. I mean, what if we were all super-powerful? We'd be changing every little thing every minute of our lives, trying to get it right. That's not how it works. You have to take what comes and make the best of it, or else there's chaos. Now, come back inside and let's see if we can't work things out before you make your big jump off the deep-end, okay?"

Storm sighed, shivered. It took a moment, but he nodded and followed Jason back inside.

* * *

Even though Storm kept telling himself he was supposed to be exhausted, sleep didn't come easily. He'd sat with the others until dawn, becoming reacquainted. Once Jason had left, he'd been invited to spend the rest of the night at Trudie's. The sofa bed was comfortable enough. He'd given Trudie a goodnight kiss and then lain down, listening to the sounds of Jane helping her into bed. Then, when everything was quiet, he tried to keep still with his eyes closed, feigning sleep, silently pleading for it. Finally, he breathed a sigh and sat up, giving in to the inevitable.

Making his way down the hall, he found Trudie's bedroom, stood in the doorway for several minutes watching her sleeping form. At least, he *assumed* she was sleeping until she sat up.

"I'm wide awake, too," she said, and beckoned to him.

Storm went in and sat beside her, enveloping her in his arms. "This whole thing is just so...weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Totally weird."

"I don't even know where to begin. Am I supposed to see a doctor? Hire a lawyer?"

"We can start with this," Trudie said, rearranging herself, taking hold of Storm's shoulders with a surprisingly firm grasp. She started massaging.

"You don't need to—"

"Shh!"

Her fingers worked against his neck and shoulders like they'd done countless

times before, easing pressure, unlocking his hidden places of tension. Eventually, she worked him out of his clothes and under the covers, where he found himself drifting between fitful dreams and elusive memories. He awoke afterward in a sweat. Disgusted with himself, he slipped out of bed, moved slowly and silently in the pre-dawn light as he dressed once again and crept unnoticed from the room.

Without any sort of specific plan, he left the duplex, started walking southward, past campus housing, past public tennis courts, and into the residentials, where folks were just starting to get up and out for the day. Schoolchildren laughed and giggled in packs as they waited for their shuttles; sleepy-eyed husbands, half-dressed for work, watered their lawns and listened to the newsfeeds on their headsets...all warm, familiar scenery—except now Storm felt as if he were a wisp of smoke, a thin cloud drifting unnoticed along the sidewalks.

I don't belong, he thought, though it wasn't a matter of where he was supposed to be.

It was *when*.

10. The Leaving Time

Storm convulsed suddenly, opened his eyes and took in a deep breath as he instinctively flung his arms over his head, guarding himself against—

—light. Sun. Cloudless, wheat field sky peeking through the glimmering mesh of a behemoth bio-dome.

Mars.

He sat up, focusing his senses. There was tall grass all around him, poking and scratching his torso, which tingled from head to toe, but which was otherwise undamaged. The sounds of the city could be heard in the distance. He shook off a nagging wave of dizziness and shifted onto his knees.

"I'll be," he thought out loud with a nervous chuckle. "It worked." *It worked!*

Slowly, and with a slight trembling in his limbs, he stood up straight and flexed his arms, watching the sleek muscles writhe beneath the skin of his newly-materialized body. His appearance was still the same—same face, hair, eye color, muscle build—but it was also enhanced, optimized, any subtle signs of aging now long gone. "The body resets itself," DK had once said. During a stream shift, when you were nothing more than a collection of molecules, an intention of the soul, the default setting didn't include any of the chronological stresses of your birth stream. You were simply you.

And when you make yourself physical again, Storm thought, starting slowly through the grass with his eyes fixed intently on the ground, *using your basic template as a guide, there's no link to dictate how old you are.*

In short: he was now immortal.

Various bits of memory flashed through his mind as he continued to scan the ground. Images of himself, of his previous stream: days spent at the docks earning whatever he could off the books (an opportunity set up by a friend of Jason's); evenings spent at Trudie's, catching up, talking, trying to laugh and play like the college kid he'd once been; nights and early morning talking or being lovers... though it was just sex in this instance, and not the heady, cosmic connection it had once been. Later: his first attempted (and ill-fated) stream; the bland interiors of various prison cells; uninspired baseball games on the vids, unappetizing cafeteria meals, monotonous drudgery in the mines. Through it all, there were familiar faces like vague shadows. DK, of course. And Jennie, Gregori...Camie.

A human snake, a silent sleuth, Storm slithered through the reeds for several more minutes before finding his prize: a dung-colored pack wrapped in a dusty cloth. He knelt on the ground and undid the straps, found a change of clothes inside, food bars, water, some money. Keeping an eye out for strangers, he quickly

donned the pack.

A half-hour trek brought him to the Martian monorail station: three stories of overcrowded lobbies, poorly-maintained public restrooms, and understaffed transport terminals crammed into a hodgepodge of steel girders and transparent aluminum. The security here would be conservative, if not outright lax, which would make it easier to slip onto a transport and out of the immediate area.

Never good to stay in one place too long, he thought as he scaled a dusty brick wall and alighted on a flight of steps leading to the station's ground floor. A handful of commuters who happened to be nearby paid him curious glances, but otherwise left him alone as he brushed himself off and tried to look calm and collected. *Just an ordinary guy coming back from taking a leak in the Martian outback.*

There was a steady stream of people on the platform. Most were too busy to pay him any attention. He kept a fairly brisk pace, scanning the schedule consoles and forming a mental itinerary. A transport headed for Mars Central was disembarking in ten minutes.

That would do nicely.

He found an automatic teller, fumbled in his pocket for the credit card, paused unintentionally as he caught site of a ruddy-faced, red-haired security guard who had apparently just exited the men's restroom. He dried his hands on his pants, gave Storm a look.

Look away, Storm thought viciously. It was a subtle command, more than a personal wish. He stepped in closer to the teller, as if he and the machine were conspiring to perform some ludicrous feat. He pretended to be interested in his credit card's details while he watched the security guard in his peripheral vision. *Mars Federal Credit Union, pre-paid credit card, standard payment features...cop tapping on his comm-band, no doubt requesting confirmation on a familiar-looking Caucasian male, five-ten, blond hair, blue eyes, early twenties.*

Ah, well.

Leaving the teller, he began walking away from the restroom area. The crowd was a blessing and a curse, since the notion of blending in was also what was keeping him from putting a decent amount of distance between himself and the security guard. Every so often he would jostle someone the wrong way, mutter a quick apology, and glance nervously over his shoulder as the cop did much the same, becoming increasingly urgent as they neared one of the terminals.

"Hey, you! Hold it!"

Storm flinched, spotted two more security guards now approaching him from up ahead. They drew their weapons.

A collective howl filled the terminal as people became aware of what was happening and either ducked for cover or ran for their lives. This created a certain amount of disorder, which Storm used to his advantage as he bolted. Throwing good manners to the wind, he navigated a peripheral path back to the main platform, pushing and shoving whomever he came into contact with. At the very least, he knew, his pursuers were having just as much difficulty keeping up, their harried voices alternating between firm demands for him to give himself up at once

and forceful suggestions to commuters to get out of the way.

They won't fire on me, Storm thought, turning a corner, peering over his shoulder, slowing his pace so as to delay any unwanted attention. *Place is full of people. To fire on an unarmed man, risking civilian casualties...not unless the price on my head has tripled in the last ten years.*

"Mr. Anderson!"

He faced forward again, and stumbled as he was hit by a particularly potent anti-climax: eight security guards—no, eight *Patrol* officers—suddenly swarming around him on the platform. Their thick, armored bodysuits and opaque headgear gave them the appearance of amphibious predators, and they were armed to the teeth.

Storm sighed inwardly, raised his hands over his head as it became all too obvious: he wasn't going anywhere.

Not today.

He surrendered, and was immediately assimilated: pockets emptied, retinas scanned, motion inhibitors placed on his wrists and ankles to make anything more than a light stroll feel like the home stretch of a triathlon.

"Mr. Anderson," continued the same Patrolman who'd initially called his name. "The Foreman would like to have a word with you."

The Foreman. No proper name was necessary; if you were ever summoned by the Foreman, you already knew who he was, and you already knew what you were in for.

"Yes," said Storm. "I bet he would."

* * *

Time Patrol HQ was a secret among Patrolmen, a mystery to the average citizens of the human sector. Storm, though designated as a "criminal" chaser—and therefore stereotypically enlightened to such matters—had no more insight as to its whereabouts than did the next person. He was taken from the monorail station, escorted onto a shuttle and sedated for the duration of the trip. When he awoke, he found himself strapped into a chair in a bare room, devoid of windows, with smooth, featureless walls. No furnishings, save for a stool placed at the opposite end, near the elusive outline of a door.

Motion caught his attention, and he turned slightly to see a familiar, specter-like form, hands clasped behind his back, strolling along the periphery of the room.

Foreman Daniel Ketch.

Storm waited patiently, recovering from the drugs, half expecting Ketch to initiate a conversation. Of course he knew Storm was awake, but he was the kind of man who preferred to have his catches ask the questions rather than ask them himself. On the plus side, the foreman had a reputation for being able to control himself in extreme situations; to perform senseless beatings during interrogations wasn't his style—though his officers were often more than happy to pick up the slack.

After a time, when Storm felt confident enough to speak coherently, he cleared his throat and said, "I've missed our little get-togethers."

Ketch stopped beside the stool. He pretended to study some minute detail of the furnishing as he spoke. "As have I. Especially during this last hiatus. Many chasers have proved to be worthy adversaries throughout my career, but none have made the game so interesting."

"I'm happy to have obliged you, then."

"Indeed." Turning to face Storm, Ketch pulled up the stool and seated himself. "The Patrol thought that they'd lost you there for a while, that perhaps you'd misstepped between streams and gotten lost in the Void. I was never uncertain, however, that you would stick to your original game plan, that you would ultimately return to Standard."

Storm sighed. "Money? Power? Immortality? Things a chaser such as myself should be interested in?"

Ketch held a prolonged silence.

Is he merely trying to get me to give an audio confession, Storm thought, *or is it that he really doesn't know?*

"Come now, Mr. Anderson. Are we to continue the game indefinitely, or is it possible to finally settle the score, to reach a mutual agreement?"

"With you holding the trophy, no doubt."

"In this game, there can only be one winner—else we find ourselves competing for nothing. We both know what you're after. It's simply a matter of when you'll go after it."

"You have it all mapped out, then, don't you?"

Ketch glowered, straightened. His patience seemed to have suddenly worn thin. "You could have gone anywhere, Mr. Anderson. Forward, backward—so far off course that not even I could find you. Yet you've come here, you've come to *me*. Why?"

"Why not?"

"I will ask you again, Mr. Anderson. Why have you returned to Standard?"

Storm went silent. Ketch was requesting the answers to questions that he didn't quite understand. Yes, Storm had returned to the Standard timeline, synced his own birth stream up with humanity's, but he had the feeling he and his opponent were looking at the situation from opposite ends.

After several minutes of unproductive silence, Ketch finally withdrew, walked slowly toward the exit. Before he left the chamber, he turned slightly, almost apologetically, and said, "It doesn't have to be this way. When is your temporal destination?"

"This is the only way," Storm replied. "You've failed me, the system has failed me."

"You didn't have to run, Storm. You could have chosen another alternative. Instead you've set a chain of events into motion that cannot be stopped. You were given the opportunity to turn yourself in at the outset, but you chose to run instead. That tells me you have every intention of following through with your

mission. I cannot allow that."

"What mission would that be?"

Ketch faced Storm. The look in his eyes was so deep and distant as to be the source of all mystery in the galaxy. "You and I have met before—or perhaps I should say we were *going* to meet, in a future stream."

"Same ol' same ol', eh?"

That intense, long-lost gaze once again. "Not quite. People change. Passing fancies become ideals that become blood oaths."

Storm didn't answer, but merely waited quietly until, at last, Ketch left the room, muttering something into his comm about "fetching the good doctor." There was an air of command in the foreman's voice—and yet it was equally evident (and somewhat surprising) that there was also a weariness tugging at the man's soul. A weariness that Storm himself shared.

Too old, too young, too long. He wants it to be over, yet he finds himself slipping toward the inevitable sleep that comes afterward. It's the same for me...and yet I still struggle. Oh, geez...I sound just like DK.

* * *

Storm receded from his body.

He was submerged in a viscous, half-tangible liquid, distorted figures dancing all around. It was difficult to discern the difference between his saturnine prison cell and the interrogation chamber. Strange faces came and went, some talking or yelling at him in unintelligible languages, others simply watching and frowning as he was tortured. This went on for an eternity, until Storm lost all sense of time, lost all sense of waking and sleeping—until he found himself simply existing as a series of random thoughts and subtle feelings.

He hardly felt the pain at all.

* * *

Storm, at age ten, standing at the edge of the small patch of grass and Big Toys that comprised the central courtyard of the urban complex where he and his parents lived. At the center of the courtyard: Jason Dang, surrounded by three Hispanic boys several years his senior, each of whom took turns shoving him around, repeating the same words over and over:

"Say it! Say it! Say it, gook!"

Jason refused to give in. With each shove that sent him wobbling on his legs into the arms of another ego-inflated bully came his firm response: "Bite me!"

His voice held all the power of an arrogant teenager—or rather, a child trying to emulate the mannerisms of a rough-and-tumble adolescent—but to see him being tossed around like a rag doll, it was almost hilarious.

Storm was seething, biting his lip, clenching and unclenching his fists, his exaggerated muscles flexing beneath his expensive, overly-flattering designer clothes

without effort, his exceptional good looks undiminished regardless of angle, lighting, or facial expression. He was a curiosity, a freak boy, an affluent model wandered off from his latest photoshoot. The others found him strangely compelling, but overall something they didn't want to understand. So, they kept away, shouting insults from afar, vocalizing their distaste and jealousy regarding his excessive template. They'd heard stories about what supposedly went on at Damien's place—the odd hours, the hedonistic parties, the liberal patronage. They wanted nothing and everything to do with him, knowing that when puberty hit, his voice would deepen gracefully, his face would remain blemish-free, his body would achieve its excessively (some would have said needlessly) muscular build in a balanced fashion and with hardly any effort. He was a pretty-boy designed to be better than his contemporaries. It was painfully obvious.

"Leave him alone!" he shouted.

"Get lost, homo!" shouted the biggest of the boys.

"I'm not a homo!"

"Well, you dress like one!"

"Go back to your daddies before you get dirt on your pretty little template!"

Jason struggled in the boys' grip, obviously sharing some of their prejudice, but looking like he was ready to be saved by anybody at this point. Even a freak boy.

It was worth a shot.

Storm launched himself in the direction of the head bully, who didn't notice his approach until it was too late. The two of them went tumbling down onto the grass, where Storm used a combination of bodyweight and brute strength to slam the bully's head into the edge of the slide. Without pausing to assess the damage, he rolled off and stood up, glaring at the others. They simply gawked, awestruck, with their mouths hanging open. Nobody moved or said a word as the bully whom Storm had attacked got unsteadily to his feet. There was a stream of blood flowing from his forehead, trickling down his cheek, staining his T-shirt.

"Dude, you're bleeding!" one of the bullies observed, and started backing away.

"The white boy's crazy!" exclaimed the other and tugged at the injured boy's sleeve. They scurried off like frightened animals, leaving Storm and Jason alone in the courtyard.

Jason looked at Storm.

Storm looked at Jason.

Neither spoke for a while.

Finally, Jason stuffed his hands in his pockets, cleared his throat, and said, "Um...thanks."

"Don't worry about it," said Storm. "Those guys are jerks. They think they can act like the people you see in the movies."

"Yeah." Jason cleared his throat again, glanced quickly up and down Storm's torso. "So...why are you dressed like that?"

Rather than explain his whole back-story, Storm simply offered, "It's one of my sponsors' clothing lines. I'm a model."

"Then it's true?"

"Then what's true?"

"They say you and your parents have midnight skin parties up in that penthouse of yours."

"Who says that?"

"People."

"What else do they say?"

Jason blushed. "They say you suck guys' wieners under the bleachers at school."

"That's a lie," Storm replied.

"But your parents are both guys, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then how come you're not...*into that stuff*, too?"

Storm shrugged. "My parents made my template, but they didn't make *me*."

This seemed to allay Jason's apprehension somewhat, and he smiled. "That was nuts what you did to that bully kid." His expression oscillated between scared witless and amazed beyond belief. For a moment Storm thought he would run away like the others, but then he flashed a grin and put his arm around Storm's shoulders. "You've *got* to teach me that!"

Storm smiled, too. Later, he would be scolded by Uncle Damien for behaving in such a reckless, "untweaked" fashion, but he wouldn't care, because he'd taken the chance and acted like a *real* boy for a change—and he'd made a friend along the way.

* * *

Good old Jason. Wonder what he's up to.

* * *

Another face came to Storm from out of the darkness. This time it was Trudie, and she looked concerned. She mumbled something at him, put her hand against his forehead and told him she'd been brought here because he was sick. The doctors were concerned. They needed him to come back if they were to treat him properly.

Come back...

Not real, Storm told himself, regrettably. *Ketch's doctors have fabricated her from my memories. Keep away.*

He retreated once again into the meadowland of his mind...

* * *

He was supposed to pop naked out of a cake.

The whole thing had been planned as a surprise for Trudie's twenty-second birthday, but instead Storm showed up at her place four hours late, with a somber face and a headache. Needless to say, he wasn't in party mode.

"I thought we were supposed to meet up for dinner," Trudie said as she let him in. She was half asleep, her oversized T-shirt rumpled.

Storm went straight for the love seat. "Bad day at work." He leaned back, unzipped the upper portion of his coveralls, closed his eyes. "Boss is being a jerk about the new calibration systems. He's acting like we've never been under the hood of a shuttle before."

"Oh, I'm sorry, baby," Trudie breathed, brushing her hair out of her face as she came to him. "What can I do to make it all better?"

"Kill my boss—and make it look like an accident."

Both fell silent for a moment, Trudie leaning against Storm and gently running her hands through his hair. She started massaging his temples. "One step at a time. Why don't we start with voodoo, and if that doesn't work, we'll hire a hit man."

Storm sighed, smiled. "Happy birthday," he said, "even though the day's pretty much shot."

"Inverted romantic," Trudie replied, tapping his chest and leaning in close for a kiss. She called him that whenever he shifted moods suddenly—like now. It was his way of dealing with turmoil: change the subject.

"You know," he whispered into her ear, returning her kisses as he helped her pull the shirt off, "there was supposed to be a cake."

Trudie was tugging at his coveralls now. "I know. Jason told me last week."

"Figures. I hope you're not too disappointed."

"Make it up to me."

Already the incident at work was forgotten. Storm stood and led her into the bathroom. It was cramped, but there was just enough room in the shower stall for two, if you used your imagination. It was their way. Trudie was the only person with whom he could have meaningless sex for the sake of having meaningless sex—and it somehow seemed all right, despite his secret wish to one day get married, to actually "do it right." Not that he was breaking any personal rules; he'd been monogamous with her since the beginning. It was merely the informality of it all that had him blushing at times, enduring his own shame in not having made a commitment on file. Of course, in order for that to work, Trudie had to have an interest as well, and she was blissfully ignorant to the idea of marriage, children, and the like.

For Storm's generation, excessive builds and oversized genitalia had become all the rage, and Storm's template didn't disappoint. How Trudie ever managed to accommodate all of him was beyond comprehension. But she had her tricks. Usually Storm relished each and every one, but now they only served to sharpen a twinge of alienation he'd somehow hidden deep down beneath all his other thoughts and emotions.

"Stop," he moaned abruptly during the proceedings, holding her at arm's length. She disengaged, looked at him curiously, lusty-eyed and half-coherent. The sight of her like this should have been an incredible turn-on. Instead, it disgusted him.

"What?" she murmured.

God. This is pathetic. "Nothing," he said aloud.

* * *

He lay awake in bed long after Trudie, satisfied by his obligatory (and somewhat robotic) return performance, had fallen asleep at his side. With considerable envy he studied her, serene and motionless (save for the calm motion of her breathing), illuminated by the soft night light strip that ran along the bed frame. He'd never been able to fall asleep like that—not even after sex. She'd kissed him goodnight, stretched glamorously, rolled onto her front, one bare leg draped over his, and that had been that.

The Net was of little assistance. Most of the video feeds were sitcom reruns. There was a political talk show on, though. Something to do with the Time Patrol. Storm shifted onto his back and adjusted the volume on his visor.

"*...in light of the recent attack on the UniGuard facility, the Time Patrol has found itself the subject of increasing pressure from intergalactic governments who believe it is time to change the way time codes are handled across the board. Tighter security is a nonplus. Many believe the Patrol should be decentralized. And, of course, there is the school of thought that the technology itself should be withdrawn from the public, restricted to government use only.*

"*To offer his insight into the Patrol, where it stands now, and what's in store for the consortium's future, we have Foreman Daniel Ketch with us in the studio. Good morning, foreman."*

"*Good morning."*

"*The recent attacks...they certainly serve as a reminder of just how delicate an operation it is to maintain and protect the very fabric of time, as it were. With this and the numerous other attacks or thefts involving time codes seemingly on an increase, is the public's concern warranted?"*

"*Well, it's certainly a delicate operation. The very nature of time, and the technology that allows us to stream into the past—we're talking physics. We're talking energy. The physical foundations of our universe. There is always going to be access to the technology no matter how many officers we put out in the field. Should the public be concerned? I don't think so. We're in a unique position today, as there have never been so many varied forms of government working together to reach a common goal. The human population, the Geckos—leonines, sylphids, daulmans—so many societies have come together to cooperate with one another in making sure our respective time streams don't get crossed. That cooperation has allowed for faster response times, more effective security measures between transportation ports... As hard as it may be to believe, streaming actually becomes safer with each passing day."*

"*You mentioned the various forms of government, human and non-human, working together to establish a universal police force—if I'm correct?"*

"*Yes."*

"*This law-enforcement body, the Time Patrol...it's come to many skeptics' attention that while the supporting members of the Patrol include various*

intergalactic species, the central Patrol coordination sector—directed by yourself—is made up entirely of human employees. So, if you live, say, outside the solar system, where humans aren't the dominant species, you get a strong notion of, 'The humans dominate the Patrol, therefore the humans dominate the time codes.'"

"*Interesting choice of words. You have to remember that there will always be someone who isn't happy with the way their government is run. There's no perfect candidate to be elected into office. Allow me to put it like this: Streaming technology was largely developed by human scientists, engineers, physicists—and at a time when the Outer Wars were at the forefront of many alien societies' political and financial agendas. Consequently, it became appropriate that the human sector be responsible for itself. Hence the Time Patrol was founded."*

"*I think the general public understands the why of the Time Patrol. However, what I think is being questioned here is the Patrol's system of checks and balances. In essence, who polices the police?"*

"*Well, naturally, the human government is the regulatory body here. That of course means that we are governed by the same rules and regulations that, say, govern Earth's CIA. As easy as it might be to believe in a police agency that is allowed to wander freely throughout the universe, it just doesn't exist."*

"*I'm going to shift modes here. The Brotherhood of the Gecko Tree. Many Geckos feel their species is being unfairly persecuted in the hunt for genuine time chasers on their homeworld. I quote the Prime Minister of the Gecko Homeworld as saying, 'The humans seek to stronghold a gift given to the universe. They seek to become the gods of time through persecution of any species that is not their own.'"*

"*The Geckos merely represent a statistic—nothing more. The Patrol seeks to curve any criminal activity that might affect the flow of time. It is our belief that every species in the universe should be allowed to live out its natural life cycle untainted by the notions of one man."*

"*So, then, let's say someone—either a citizen of Earth or the Earth Colonies—breaks time law and manages to escape into the Outer Worlds, or say a neighboring galaxy even. How does the Patrol deal with criminals who aren't within the human sector?"*

"*Well, among other things, the human government has negotiated extensively with alien governments in multiple galaxies. The key is to have a standardized system of communication between police forces, especially at crucial wormhole access points..."*

Storm clicked off his headset and placed it back in its cubby, which retreated into the side of the bed with a soft hiss. Rather than ease his thoughts, the political broadcast had simply stirred them up more so. It seemed like all the news focused on these days was the evident time streaming craze and how it was supposed to make or break human existence.

Take it too seriously, he thought, *and this could really be the beginning of the end.*

Shifting on the bed, turning away from Trudie, Storm allowed a familiar chill to come over him—as if loneliness were a thing restricted to the shadows, something that only came out to feed when everyone in the world but Storm Anderson was

safely asleep.

But it's always been this way, hasn't it? Loneliness, uncertainty. Missing the mother who never was, the woman who carried your template through gestation. Living for eighteen years with a father and his gay lover, both of whom were, for all intents and purpose, cardboard cutouts, social clichés, so damned sure I was going to become a supermodel or an Olympic hero—and when I was just average, a pretty body wrapped around an average, everyday soul, they gave up on me, went through the motions of living, doing the bare minimum it took to get me through public school. And afterward, at the party with all the other high school graduates...getting the message that my father's body had been found out on the front lawn...twenty story jump, neck snapped clean—an instantaneous death, luckily. Lucky for dad. He didn't have to read the suicide note left on the kitchen counter. He didn't have to spend that last year with Uncle Damien, an utter mess left to manage what was left of the family that had failed him.

Storm wanted to wake Trudie, to tell her all these things, but he knew she wouldn't get it. Which wasn't to say she was shallow or inconsiderate. She merely had absolutely no emotional depth—which meant she could easily dilute any excess from him. Usually it worked, and he became serene, and he was thankful for her presence. Sometimes, however, he wondered if he was holding onto his high school sweetheart as a crutch. Mutual friendship, support, sexual release, one of those rare partners who possessed an active mind and a potent libido. She didn't mind his various mood swings, his superficial template. But was it *love*?

Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night with the blood rushing in his ears. He would sit up, feel his heart hammering in his chest, hear his breath coming in gasps. He would look around the room for the first few seconds and wonder where he was, wonder who he was. If he was in bed with Trudie, he would wonder who she was as well, and he would always feel...alone. Like an alien might feel, suddenly transplanted from across the galaxy into a new world, with no friends or family. He might be able to speak the native language, but there was no connection, no point of reference otherwise.

The feeling was creeping in now. Storm shuddered slightly and got up out of bed, adjusted the waist of his shorts. It was an odd sensation: his body told him that the air in the room was comfortably warm—yet there was a chill. Upon further consideration he discovered that it was coming from within himself, not without.

He went to the small meal counter that was embedded in the wall opposite Trudie's bed. Taking a seat on one of the two stools, he swished his hand over the counter, which responded in kind by illuminating itself. A soft beep confirmed that it was ready to take his order. He selected "water" from the beverages list displayed on the service panel, and a moment later an eight-ounce glass sparkled into existence on the counter top. He downed it in a single draught, made a face and licked his lips as the "thin" taste registered on his tongue.

Cheap bulk matter, he thought as he replaced the glass on the counter. The water hadn't been bad, but its elements had definitely been derived from generic

matter (just because it had the necessary two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule didn't mean the food synthesizer's preset had accurately replicated the natural mineral taste he'd become accustomed to). But that was life in San Francisco. So many people crammed into such a small space. Nature's resources had to be divvied out accordingly, and where there wasn't enough, technology had to step in and pick up the bill.

Storm rose from the counter with the realization that he was thinking way too much about things that shouldn't even have been on his mind at one o'clock in the morning.

He went back to bed.

* * *

Eventually, the entities around him came less frequently, and he was able to relax somewhat—if drifting sleeplessly between aura and flesh could be considered relaxation. At last, DK was there, a tangible dream coming at him through a murky darkness, reptilian eyes holding the slight glow of the surrounding chamber.

"*You do well, for a human. Not many of your kind can so easily induce—and maintain—zerostate at will. There may be hope for you after all, yes? Now, come awake, come alive. It is safe now, I will protect you. Come up, come out. I will protect you...*"

Storm felt gentle hands working over his head and chest, felt something sharp pricking the skin of his left arm—

"Oh, no," he groaned suddenly, coming awake all at once, slamming head-on into a wall of wretched sensation. He coughed, doubled over in DK's arms; his entire body felt swollen and thick. He could taste his own vomit, smell his own feces.

"I have pumped you full of painkillers," DK said, holding him tight, "and some stimulants to get you going. You are in bad shape, but it is nothing a little nanotherapy will not fix. First, we must get you out of here."

Storm struggled into a standing position, tried to make out his surroundings, but the lighting was dim, and his eyes burned. At the very least, he knew he was in a holding cell of some kind, small, judging by the lack of aural reverberation. He squinted down at his arms, saw blotchy skin through tattered clothes.

"How long?" he rasped.

"Three days," DK replied. "They have been torturing you, trying to elicit a response from your mind through various barbaric techniques. However, I do not think they have been successful. Can you walk?"

Storm took a tentative step, wobbled slightly, but remained standing. "I think so." He looked at DK, noticed the blood trickling from his nostrils. "You're bleeding."

DK nodded. "An unfortunate side-effect. A fortress as strong as this has many safeguards against temporal shifts. I alone could not establish a connection. I required a partner." He gestured toward the opposite end of the cell. Storm could

barely make out the comatose form lying on its side near the wall.

"You mean...?"

"He volunteered to give his life for me, so that I could save you. I, in turn, will exchange my life for yours."

Storm's gut tightened involuntarily. He clutched DK's arms fiercely. "I can't ask this of you."

"Leaving here will require an enormous amount of energy. I am already drained considerably. Therefore, to accomplish the task of escape, you must act as the navigator, and I must become the battery. It is the only way."

"I'm not going to—"

"There is no time to argue. Only time for action."

Storm continued to protest, but he knew DK had already set his mind on completing the rescue. There was no turning back now. And, after all, it would be unpleasant to remain here indefinitely, at the mercy of Ketch and his Patrol. This was probably the only chance he would have at escape.

He squeezed back the tears as he nodded and steadied himself within DK's grip. He felt the telltale vibration beginning to flow from his companion's hands.

"Remember what I taught you," DK said. "The wheel always turns. We will come around again, you will see."

And with that he extended his aura so that it enveloped the both of them. The process was not unlike that performed by the high-tech equipment in a time mall —except here and now, their temporal journey knew no boundaries. The cell walls blurred out of focus as the vibrational frequency of their bodies accelerated beyond that of the surrounding space. In essence, they disappeared, though the mind and soul combination remained ever-present, always controlling, always guiding.

At first, it was difficult, and rather like swimming through a thick gel. Storm's astral body strained, his legs kicking firmly, his arms taking wide, broad strokes as he struggled to distance himself from the heavy shell that surrounded the Time Patrol base. However, DK's reservoirs were deep, and the soul connection was strong. Storm did not give up until he was free of the prison cell, free of the physical confines of a regulated time stream. The farther from those confines he went, the more powerful he felt himself become; without the limited capacities of a flesh body to hold him back, he was one with the cosmos.

He could have gone anywhere in the galaxy. His unhindered presence amongst the stars offered endless possibilities: worlds he'd been to, worlds he'd planned to visit—times and places even the Patrol didn't know about, places he could hide—but in the end he decided that there was only one option, if he wanted DK to live.

* * *

Though the mind and soul are limitless, the body is not. A finely-tuned precision instrument, its strengths and weaknesses are governed by the laws of physics. One can always rearrange the building blocks of one's own body, but the number of blocks always remains constant. In order to interact with the physical

universe, one's physical life force must be strong enough to perpetuate the basic processes of DNA synthesis.

DK's life force was weak indeed; he was comatose when he materialized, alongside Storm, in the Gecko temple.

Storm convulsed involuntarily, gagged and rolled onto his side as he fought back the typical disorientation and attempted to ascertain the status of his companion. He tried to cry out in anguish when he saw the vicious lacerations covering DK's body, but exhaustion overcame him, and he slumped forward, fell headfirst onto the cold wet stone.

Somewhere nearby a holy man called for help.

11. Underground Avenue

Storm fell quiet, realizing that during her storytelling Annah had come to lie in his arms once again. Her ease in his presence (as well as her apparent knowledge of his most personal life stories) was intriguing. He wondered just what sort of relationship they'd had together during his previous visit, his previous lifetime.

"That's pretty much on the mark," he said.

"I tend to pay attention to detail."

"So, were we...*are* we friends?"

Annah looked away. "We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl."

"What's that from?"

"I don't know. I heard it playing through someone's window." Annah slipped from his arms and stood up, stretching. "We should get back. Get some sleep before dawn." She started toward the garden wall.

Storm followed, feeling dubious. He thought of the memories she'd reawakened, memories of himself and Trudie, puttering around her dorm between school and work. Their routine had become a comfortable monotony—it made him think of what it was really like, living in a specific stream and not just *remembering* it. The days spent slaving away at his day job, the nights spent snuggled together on the couch or in bed...and then, afterward, the realization that no laugh, no kiss, no orgasm could mask the loneliness.

You don't just tell strangers things like that, he thought, and quietly followed Annah back to her home, studying her as he went, and trying to foretell memories that hadn't yet been made.

* * *

The flow of people into and out of Great Hope was relentless when high noon approached, bringing with it miserable heat and sultry breezes that would make even the most cold-blooded creatures take to the bare necessities where clothing was concerned. However, the group of men loitering around the Xiao-Ping fountain seemed not to notice the temperature. They wore heavy, bulky cloaks and hoods, giving them the appearance of desert travelers. Every so often one of the men would swish his hand into the fountain and sip some water, but other than that, the aggregation simply lounged, watching the arched terminal entrance as citizens and traders continued to pass through.

Great Hope's gateways reached peak hour with the arrival of a number of heavily-loaded caravans, just in from a long excursion. As the caravans slowly and

meticulously passed through inspection, the cloaked men by the fountain began to stir and became noticeably alert.

Among legions of overlapping voices, some human, some not, they conversed:

"This isn't good."

"Yeah, too many people to look after. If he's anywhere nearby, waiting to slip past..."

"Should we call for backup?"

"No, wait. Look. Over by that cart."

Suddenly one of the cloaked men had a pair of binoculars up to his eyes. He focused in on a young human male, light-skinned and wearing overalls and a straw hat. Beside him was a woman of the typical, ambiguously tanned Great Hope complexion, dressed in the same manner.

"They look like farmers," whispered one of the men.

"Scan the male."

The cloaks did well to hide any devices being activated underneath. A moment later, as if something had suddenly caught their attention, the group of cloaked men left the fountain and strode forcefully into the crowd.

"That's him. Arm yourselves appropriately. We only want him unconscious."

* * *

"I don't see him," Storm muttered, staring intently at the fountain. Here and there, in passing, he thought he caught a glimpse of Chris's familiar face, but it always turned out to be someone else.

Come on, Chris, he thought. He blinked—and suddenly his view of the fountain was blocked by a group of cloaked men heading in his direction.

"Let's go," he hissed, grabbing Annah's hand and pulling her through the crowd, away from the fountain.

She shot a confused glance back toward the gateway. "What? Why?"

Storm didn't answer. He only plowed through the masses of people, his pace quickening. Annah held onto him and looked back over her shoulder.

"Storm," Annah hissed, "we're being followed."

"I know—and not by opportunistic merchants, I'm guessing. Just stay close and play it cool." As he spoke, his pace quickened even more, so that they were almost running. Every time he looked over his shoulder, the men were closer.

"Storm," Annah said as he pulled her between two traders who were in the middle of a conversation. "Storm—they're right behind us!"

Storm looked back again, and everything around him—the people, carts, buildings—slowed and faded into a blur; the six men did not. Within the shade of one of those hoods he saw the flash of teeth, and he could almost hear a voice saying, "*We have you.*"

"Damn," he breathed, grabbing Annah and pulling her beside him. "Run!"

The sea of people parted unwillingly as Storm pushed and shoved his way ahead, earning plenty of surprised grunts and swear words from those he

disturbed. Such outbursts were echoed as the Patrolmen shifted into pursuit, drawing their guns. A few nearby onlookers screamed at this point.

"Is this your idea of playing it cool?" Annah shouted.

"This way!" Storm shouted back, pulling her along with him as he turned onto another street, one that was even more densely packed than the last. Here, the buildings were smaller and consisted mostly of shops and markets.

"We need a place to hide," said Storm, pausing for a moment to get his bearings. "You know the city—where can we get out of sight?"

Annah took the lead. Her verbal answer came momentarily, when she suddenly dropped to her knees and started clawing at the lid of a manhole. "At the risk of being too literal..."

Storm scrunched up his nose. "Oh, this is *absolutely* too literal!" But he dropped down and helped her get the lid off. Then he followed her through.

There were several things he noticed when he alighted on the subterranean metallic walkway below: he was *not* in a sewer system; rather, he was now standing beside a large six-lane highway, lit by fluorescent strips that ran along the arced walls, and which cast an artificial glow on the shuttles speeding back and forth; he and Annah were now in the midst of a group of men—a half-dozen or so—who didn't look all that friendly.

Great, thought Storm, clasping Annah's hand and trying to slow his frantic breath. *Out of the sun and into the arms of Great Hope's finest chain gang.*

"Hey, now," said one of the gang members, stepping forward fearlessly. "What's a boy-toy like you doing on the Avenue? Looking to make some extra money?"

Storm cast a quick glance back toward the thin shaft of light that shone down from the open manhole. *At any moment those Patrolmen are going to come pouring down, guns and all.*

"And who's this fine female companion you got here?" continued another of the men, reaching out to brush a hand across Annah's chin.

Voices were emanating from above, and suddenly the light was obstructed; the hunters had arrived. Desperation forced Storm into action.

"I don't have time for this," he said, pulling Annah behind him as he delivered a well-placed kick to the chest of the nearest thug. As another man grabbed Storm around the shoulders, he used the hold to give his next kick support before squirming out of the grip and round-housing his captor in the gut.

"Come on!" he yelled at Annah, and pushed her through the group of men. "Hail a taxi or something!"

The next thug attacked with a sharp jab in the ribs and a quick follow-up punch that knocked the air from Storm's lungs and sent him staggering. He used his momentum effectively, grabbing another attacker, kneeing him in the groin, and shoving him aside. Just as he turned, one more thug hurtled toward him with a knife. Storm didn't waste a moment as he swung his torso around and kicked the man in the face. The thug stumbled to the ground, blood trickling from his nose.

The rest of the gang was, no doubt, contemplating whether or not to risk their livelihood with someone who obviously knew how to fend for himself on (or

under, as it were) the streets when the bright red beam of a laser rifle being discharged by a descending Patrolman decided for them. The shot just barely missed Storm's shoulder, striking the walkway and sending a small cloud of smoke into the air.

"Storm!" cried Annah. "Over here! Hurry!"

Holding his side, Storm scurried off the walkway and toward a small consumer-sized shuttle where Annah was holding the passenger door open. He threw himself inside and the shuttle kicked into motion, leaving the mess of wounded gangsters and angry police behind.

"What was going on back there?" exclaimed the woman in the driver's seat. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, just a few bruises, that's all," replied Storm, rearranging himself into a sitting position and glancing at their savior, a middle-aged leonine woman with gold-striped fur. Her exotic eyes regarded him with concern.

"Let me see," urged Annah, leaning forward from the back seat and taking hold of Storm's overalls.

"No, I'm fine. It's just a scratch."

The driver's concern was mounting. "Jackals. Maybe we should have a doctor look at you."

"No, no, I'm fine, ma'am," Storm replied, eyeing the other cars that passed. "Every so often there'll be trouble up at the markets with thieves. Thanks for stopping."

"Please, call me Betty.

Storm smiled. "Thank you, Betty."

* * *

Traffic was horrendous leaving Great Hope. Through the radioways and phone networks the rumor spread that the police were looking for a dangerous suspect in a murder case, causing checkpoints to batten down their security. Hundreds of shuttles inched forward through the terminals as swarms of uniformed officers scanned each vehicle for their man.

A black Ford Saber XL was among the confusion, and before it even neared the highway terminal, ten officers and their rifles pointed at the tinted windows while they yelled for the leonine driver to get out. She was told to hold her hands over her head and back away from the car as it was scanned for the second time, without results.

"The vehicle is empty," someone said.

"Search it anyway," said another.

With a sigh that bordered a growl, Betty raised a furry eyebrow and flashed her teeth. "Gentlemen, would you mind telling me what all the fuss is about? I'm late for a dinner appointment, and I'm *ferociously* hungry."

Some of the younger Patrolmen swallowed uneasily, recalling the semi-true tales of leonine carnivorous appetites.

"Sorry, ma'am," said one of the braver men after Betty had been thoroughly searched. "This won't take but a minute. Standard procedure and all, strictly to ensure your safety."

Intertwining with his voice were numerous others, all unsure or annoyed:

"Could he have gotten into another shuttle?"

"Maybe she drove him a few miles and dropped him off before the checkpoint."

"I don't trust the cat-woman."

"Do *you* want to take her in and maybe risk losing an arm or a leg in the process?"

"Forget I mentioned it."

"Let her go. We've got nothing. He's just not here."

12. DK

Sometimes it seemed like the only world that was real was the one stored in his mind.

Storm was vaguely aware of his physical surroundings, the vibrations of the shuttle, the echo of cars passing on the avenue, but his consciousness was caught in a bubble that was submerged just beneath the flow of one stream in a billion. Zerostate, autostasis, sleep, dreaming—call it what you will, it was the haven of the mind, and Storm found himself once again retreading the outward loops of his travels across time and space...

* * *

"I'm not a chaser."

"Okay then, Mr. Anderson. If that's the case, please explain how it's possible that I'm standing here talking to a living, breathing person rather than a collection of random, scattered particles."

They'd been over the matter at least a dozen times, and still Storm had no idea what it was Gareth wanted him to admit. *Six hours,* he thought to himself. *Six hours sitting in an uncomfortable chair in the bowels of some Godforsaken police station, the knockout drugs only beginning to wear off...and a jerk-off Patrolman who hasn't gotten laid in five years, treating me like I'm a freaking time chaser. Whose side is the Patrol on anyway?*

Gareth (if his name tag was to be believed) slowly paced the length of the room, his hands clasped behind his back, his head tilted upward as if plucking lines out of thin air on a whim. "Mr. Anderson, I grow tired of these lengthy silences."

"I don't have anything to say," Storm replied, rolling his head around his shoulders, which had begun to tighten up over the last hour or so. "I don't know what you want me to say that I haven't already said, or that you haven't already stolen from my head with your drugs."

"You're taking this rather lightly, aren't you?"

"No. I'm just tired. I want to go home. I want to forget we ever met."

For the first time since their meeting, Gareth turned and faced Storm, actually *faced* him, his eyes making contact with Storm's. "Then I suggest you start cooperating."

"I've *been* cooperating—"

"How did you do it, then?"

"Do what?"

"Don't play dumb, damn it!"

"I'm not playing dumb!" Storm exclaimed. "Corrupted memory cards, a crossed stream, bad wiring in the helm—isn't this stuff you guys are supposed to be taking care of? And if I were a chaser out to tamper with your precious streams, don't you think it would've shown up in the database by now?"

"Maybe. Or maybe you're *still* tampering, waiting for a specific point in time when it's more efficient to make your move. It would be foolish to assume our methods are infallible. Gecko soldiers can and have been trained to suppress any memory of their mission objective until they reach a point of activation, where they activate the appropriate mental trigger. Maybe you've been hanging out with one too many of the fundamentalists, and you're convinced it's your job to plant a bomb at Patrol HQ—at which point it's just a little too late to care that old Gareth felt sorry for a pretty-faced neophyte with a far-fetched story."

Storm swore under his breath. "I get a lawyer. I want my lawyer."

"Fine, if you want to go that route." Gareth was obviously having a tough time controlling his temper. "It won't make any difference in front of the United Council. You give us as little information as you've given and you're considered a security threat, hands down."

"Fine." *Anything to get out of this room, to get away from you.*

Gareth paused for a moment, on the verge of saying something else but instead only studying Storm curiously. Eventually he sighed and straightened, heading for the exit. "Have it your way. Effective immediately, you will be transferred to a temporary holding cell at Patrol Headquarters. You have the right to a state-appointed lawyer who will represent you before the UC, etc., etc. Have a good day." His monotonous, half-assed speech was cut off as the door slid shut.

What a total and complete asshole, Storm thought, at a loss as to how Gareth held down his job with any amount of dignity. He tried welling up as much anger as he could, but he was nevertheless scared out of his mind. Facing the UC was serious business. Only the bad boys went there: political misfits, murderers, terrorists, and time chasers—and everyone in the building seemed to think Storm belonged to the latter most group.

Was everyone in this stream completely insane?

* * *

Storm had his sight knocked out temporarily (despite his protest) as he was transported to Time Patrol Headquarters. It was a quick jolt to the temples, not particularly painful, but extremely discomforting nonetheless. Afterward, he was handcuffed and seated alone in the passenger compartment of a police shuttle. Only his thoughts provided companionship during the brief journey.

On reaching his undisclosed destination, he was herded outside and up a short ramp. He could only imagine what the place looked like; bits of imagery, spawned by the subtle sound of an unhindered breeze, flickered through his mind. Otherwise, there was total silence.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders, stopping him about fifteen steps up the ramp. An electronic beep sounded off to his right as one of the officers punched in a clearance code of some kind. Momentarily, there was a mechanical swish—a door opening. He was guided inside, then made to stop again. From the way gravity seemed to reverse itself, he realized that they were in an elevator. His brain caught on and he was able to reorient himself quickly so that he didn't stumble. The sensation was familiar—where had he felt this before?

The National Museum of Astronomy. Artificial gravity. He'd visited earlier in the year with Trudie. *We must be aboard a space station. Heavy stuff. Only the science research labs and the Earth Embassy are worth the money to keep up here. I am so in for it.*

It was a ten minute walk through a maze of corridors and numerous checkpoints before the officers brought him to a stop in some nameless office where he was processed like a bit of cargo.

"Delivery," said the officer on Storm's right. "Found him in some guy's apartment down in San Fran."

Jason. Poor Jason. "What's going to happen to me?" Storm asked, unaware that it was his own voice escaping his lips.

He got no response.

"Let's see. Storm Anderson. Born November 10, 2279. No criminal record..."

That's right, thought Storm as his sightless eyes blinked at nothing. *No criminal record—so why am I being put through all this?*

His forehead was stamped, and they led him to the holding area.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" he asked.

"Until the foreman can review your case."

"What case? I'm at East Cedar one minute, and the next I'm waking up in the middle of the street. How the hell is that a case?"

"Don't make this harder on yourself, Mr. Anderson."

"What about the eyes thing?" he asked as he heard the buzz of a security field being deactivated. He was pushed inside his cell faster than he would have liked, and stumbled a bit, reaching out with his arm to steady himself against the wall. When the cell was sealed again and the officers hadn't answered, Storm turned around, started making his way back toward the entrance. "Look, I want to know what the hell is going on! I want my lawyer! How long is this going to take?"

"As long as it takes. Now pipe down."

He heard the officers leaving, then, and knew it was pointless to try getting anything more out of them.

With a frustrated sigh, he leaned back against the wall and rubbed his face. *What the hell am I going to do now?* He blinked a few times, but couldn't tell yet if his vision was returning. He'd been told it was only temporary, but temporary meant nothing when he was right in the middle of trying to get around unfamiliar territory in total darkness.

"911. Is that a joke?"

Storm flinched. He'd been unaware there was anyone else with him in the cell.

Suddenly his apprehension flared. To be alone in a cell with someone he couldn't see, not even sure if that person was the only other prisoner in the cell—the not-knowing was infuriating.

"Sorry?" Storm replied, his voice unsteady. He straightened somewhat.

"The ID number on your head. SA-00X-911."

"Oh. Is that what that is?"

"Yes. You are young to be in here."

"How's that?" Storm tried to play off his fear as disinterest. He slid his back down along the wall so that he sat with his arms propped on his knees. He listened, studying the voice, trying to piece together a face to match the sound.

"Most people who tamper with time do so because they do not like where it is taking them. For humans, this usually means people shifting from youth to middle life. They see the beginnings of gray hair, wrinkles, sagging skin, and they do not like it. They do not want to get old, to die." A shuffling as whoever it was got off his bunk and approached Storm. "You young ones, though, I have not seen one of you around here in a long while."

A pause. Storm smelled something like mint—heavy, earthy. He began to speculate as to what species his new cell mate was.

"My name is DK."

A serpentine hand took hold of Storm's. He shook it, feeling scaly skin, unnatural for any human, brushing against his palm. "I'm Storm."

"Hello, Storm. Welcome to The Hole." DK let go and settled himself down beside his new companion. "There is not much more to do here than what we are doing right now."

That was hardly reassuring. "How long have you been in here?"

"Three weeks, this time."

Three weeks! Was that what the Patrol considered temporary confinement? "Three weeks?" he echoed.

"Yes, and I am considered a newcomer. Some have been in captivity for much longer while their cases work their way through the system."

Storm was afraid to ask, but did so anyway: "What are you in for?"

DK laughed. "For the same reason as you: stepping out of time. For accidentally figuring out the truth for ourselves. You see, no one is supposed to know about the freedom of streaming. No offense, but it is the human government's most precious method of control. When citizens find out, the government makes a point of catching them and making them disappear before they spread the truth. They have a yearly schedule. They send a shipload of us 'annoyances' out to a labor camp in some corner of the galaxy nobody has ever heard of. They keep us swept under the carpet."

"But I never messed with time. I was in an accident, it was a mistake. I'm a *victim*."

"It does not matter. You have jumped streams, right? And chances are you did it against the norm."

Storm bit his lip. "They say the helm I was in was damaged, that I crossed over

on accident and without mechanical help. Like I'm some super-spiritual Gecko."

DK chuckled again. "You are stereotyped toward my kind?"

"Oh...sorry," said Storm, cheeks ablaze.

"I understand. It is not your fault your leaders have given you false information. But it does not matter to the Patrol. You have discovered a breach in the system, and as such you are a liability. For example, what if one day you became unhappy and decided to blackmail your government?

"No, you and I are as good as gone. What happens next depends on how difficult you are, and on what Foreman Ketch decides. If you are a painful nuisance, he will simply keep you in a cell like this for the rest of your life, which could be quite a long, long time considering the effects of free-form jumping on human DNA. However, if you get along well you will receive a better option: life in solitude. You look strong, easily capable of doing some good, hard physical work, and perhaps enough of a brain to keep your mouth shut as well. Yes, they will keep you around because there is a shortage of extraterrestrial labor on the new stations going up here and there. As long as we keep to ourselves and do what is told to us, we are allowed to live."

I should be so lucky, thought Storm, biting his lip. *I'll never see Jason or Trudie or anyone else again at this rate.* He felt the urge to cry well up within him stronger than it had ever been since he was a boy, but he held back, held onto hope. *No. There's got to be another way. You don't know what's going to happen yet.*

He cleared his throat. "So what's this DNA stuff you're talking about? I've never heard of it."

A snicker from DK. "Of course not. You do not think that if everyone knew the truth they would listen to a single word their government tells them? No, control is keeping the masses ignorant so the Elites can have whatever they want, whenever they want it. Because everyone has a birth stream, a series of predefined events leading from the cradle to the grave. If you stay in your stream, your life is as predictable as a history book timeline. If you break free of your stream, you are no longer governed by fate or time. Your body stops aging, your mind clears and projects itself outward...you become freed. Free from the man-made ritual of mortality."

"That's not scientifically possible," Storm said.

"Of course it is. For years scientists have pondered the problem. The honest ones, at least. Pollutants, disease, and genetic defects are largely banes of the past on all developed worlds. Our templates are designed to last for thousands of years—so why don't they? Why does the human body age and die after only a century? It is time. Time is a measurement of motion streaming outward from the center of our galaxy. It is a gift from God that is currently being mismanaged by Elites who desire nothing more than power and eternity for themselves."

"Elites?"

"Yes. Those who have studied and practiced the nuances of time and space so as to be able to manipulate them directly. They are the ultimate time chasers, able to jump from one stream to another without using modern technology. They can do

what you did a million times over, whenever and wherever they want. Most have the wisdom that comes with such discipline to know what to do with themselves—but there are a few who are in high places of power who use their abilities to bully others. That is why most citizens like us are stuck with our mortal lives. Imagine if everyone was immortal. There would be no Elites and no average-folk. Every creature would be the same. No good and no evil."

"But...that's a good thing, right?"

"Not if you are bad."

"Ah. I see." Storm had to pause for a moment. His head was spinning, as much from the blindness as from the concepts being presented. "What did you say you're in here for again?"

"Enjoying the view," DK said, laughing. "I never stick to one thing much, so I jump from stream to stream every so often to keep myself busy. The Patrol tends to catch up with me every now and again. It is time for me to...how do you say? Rest with my laurels. It is not so bad anyway, to be moving from station to station. It is not paradise, it is not too bad, either. There is a lot of work involved, but they feed you well, and it is better than death, because then there is nothing, right? As long as I am alive, there is the chance of escape, even if it is a really small chance."

That may have been, but Storm didn't relish the idea of having to spend the rest of his life as a prisoner—even if he spent it on a minimum-security space station with all the conjugal babes he could ever want. He blinked into (what was for him) the darkness and tried to reason with the fears in his head, tried to assess the situation and how the UCC would judge his case. For the millionth time since his accident, he found himself thinking about the stories and rumors, the so-called first-hand accounts from people who had, for whatever reason, attempted to break free of their birth streams, and who had been hunted by the Patrol—hunted and swept under the carpet, out of the public eye. Even people who'd inadvertently broken the rules and been victimized by the government. Now it was all too real. *People like me don't matter. They're going to have their way, and there's nothing I can do about it.*

DK must have read his expression. Storm heard him sigh as he got up and returned to whatever part of the cell he'd occupied before Storm's arrival. "Take my advice, Storm. Release your old life. They will take it from you anyhow. This is where you are now. Think about it. Deal with it."

Storm didn't answer. He merely stared out at nothing and listened to the faint sound of DK's videobox as it broadcast a boxing match. Even after lights out, after his companion had gone to sleep, Storm remained where he was, growing tired and developing a backache, but trying to ignore it all.

Trying to ignore the growing dread.

* * *

At some point in the middle of the night, his sight returned. He blinked at his dimmed surroundings, seeing the cell for the first time by way of the faint security

strip which glowed along the upper perimeter of the compartment, where the walls met the ceiling. There was a bunk in one corner, a urinal in the other, a sealed entranceway at his right, and not much else. DK slept sprawled on the bottom bunk. His body was considerably more massive than a well-built, fully-grown human male's, with muscles that looked to be the result of careful cultivation. He wore large bracelets on his wrists and ankles—motion inhibitors.

Storm rearranged himself into a slightly more comfortable position—but not too comfortable; he didn't want to sleep soundly in his present situation. He kept his eyes halfway open for the remainder of the night, studying the cell (which seemed to be foolproof), drifting in and out of sleep, and just when he was about to nod off for good, the cell door swished open and a guard nudged him with his foot.

"On your feet, Anderson. Time to go."

13. UCC Hearing

It was nearing sunset when Annah told the driver to stop at a roadside motel. Immediately, she jumped out of the shuttle and ran to the rear, pulling off the tarp. The driver (a private farmer) helped excavated Storm's comatose body, buried deep in layers of burlap, and carried him into the room, where he laid Storm on the bed.

"He's so cold," Annah remarked. Storm's body was limp, lifeless, and covered with a sheen of sweat, matting his hair and trickling down his skin.

He looks dead, she thought.

She thanked the farmer for the lift and left the room, then, making her way quickly to the drugstore across the street. She remembered what Storm had hurriedly told her back in Great Hope: *Find a pharmacy, buy some kind of stimulant. Epinephrine, smelling salts—whatever you can find. If I don't come around within a couple of minutes, slap me, hit me, yell at me. I'll find my way back.*

She searched the shelves until she found a first-aid kit, which she purchased hastily. She then hurried back to the motel room and, with shaking hands, fumbled open the package, passed the smelling salts under Storm's nose, shook him, talked to him. Slowly but surely, his body was reanimated. It started with faint breath, then color to the skin and, lastly, a hoarse coughing fit as his respiratory system came into full swing again. The cough turned to tremors followed by incoherent mumbling.

"It's okay," Annah said, gathering him in her arms. "It's over. We're outside the city."

With his teeth chattering, Storm reached out and grasped her wrist, holding her tight. "Thank you."

"Yeah," Annah replied. "Smooth sailing from here, right?"

Her words went unheard; though now out of autostasis, Storm had fallen asleep.

* * *

Andrew Benson was hardly the lawyer Storm had expected. The man resembled a nervous penguin: he was squat, overweight, balding—he had nothing of the charisma of someone who was supposed to be adept at moving mountains on behalf of his clients.

Storm met with him as he was being hustled into a shuttle bound for the UCC.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Anderson," Benson panted, sweating as if he'd just run a mile uphill. He wiped the moisture from his face with a handkerchief. "I'll be

representing you during today's hearing."

Storm sat slumped on his end of the seat. It was difficult for him to keep a decent posture with the heavy MI bracelets on his wrists and ankles. He'd been dressed in a suit and tie for his court date—the tailor had laughed while fitting him, saying something like, "The suit and tie is a side-step. Count on your next one being a one-piece, and bright orange, at that."

Charming fellow, Storm had thought. *With frankness like that, no wonder he works for the Patrol and not a local tailor.*

The shuttle launched promptly (apparently, due process was on a tight schedule these days).

Storm turned slightly in his seat and scrutinized Benson. "Well?" he grunted.

"Pardon?"

"What's the sentence these days for falling out of your chair at a time mall?"

Benson tried to put on his most comforting expression as he gripped his briefcase with whitened knuckles. Apparently, he didn't do well on extraterrestrial trips. "I'm not going to lie to you. The Patrol takes security very seriously, right down to the smallest 'accident.' You have to understand that in these cases a mouse getting lost in an adjacent stream is just as bad as Napoleon getting a time machine for his birthday."

"You're saying I'm a mouse?"

"No, no, of course not. Not at all. I'm simply trying to make clear the scope of the Patrol's investigation into matters such as yours."

"It was an accident. You can tell them that, right?"

"Mr. Anderson, I will do everything in my power to help you. I'm just trying to make sure you keep yourself grounded. We can't expect the impossible. You have to understand, the slightest security breach could open the doorway to much more complicated things—"

"We've already been over the why. I just want to know *how* the hell I've become a security breach?"

"In leaving your own birth stream, you've invariably entered someone else's, which infringes upon his or her personal rights—"

"So why not just send me back to my own stream?"

"It's not that simple—"

"No kidding." Storm looked away.

"I'm sorry, Storm. Can I call you Storm? I'd prefer to—"

"Whatever." Storm's gaze held the tapestry of stars beyond the window. *Might as well get a good view out of all this.*

"Well..." Benson continued after a moment's silence. "Let's start with that, then. Let's work on making the Council see things from our point of view. Convince them that there's nothing to worry about."

Brilliant notion, you being a lawyer and all. "All I want is to get back home to my apartment, my job, my friends." Storm turned finally to face Benson. "Can you do that for me?"

Now it was Benson's turn to stare out the window. "Let's hope for the best."

* * *

The UCC had been designed with power in mind—power on the side of the law, not the citizen. It was the single largest structure on the moon besides the sports dome, and it was the most intimidating. A panel of judges sat at the head of the high-ceilinged courtroom hall, and as Storm entered, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread. It was the kind of place that made one think: *I am an insect. This is their picnic. Chances are the only attention they'll pay me is enough to rid themselves of my presence.*

"Must be a slow day," Benson muttered, gesturing at the patches of people—human and otherwise—sitting in the stadium-sized spectator tier.

It was just like in the news feeds.

"Yeah...right," Storm breathed, taking his seat. He turned to Benson, who pulled out his laptop and started typing furiously. "So, how is this going to work?"

Benson didn't look up as he answered (further adding to Storm's sense of doom). "Well, I'll be presenting your case in a few moments. I'll state the facts, which will be reviewed among the panel members, who will advise the judge on whether or not we move on to trial. Most likely, we'll have this whole thing behind us within a few minutes."

Storm was incredulous. "A few *minutes*?"

"The UCC is very efficient. One way or another, they'll let you know what they think. There's no beating around the bush."

"What about the trial? And a jury?"

"Again, if it's deemed appropriate by the panel..."

Garbage in, garbage out, thought Storm, leaning against the metallic table he and Benson shared (along with a spare Patrol officer). For a moment he stared out at the panel members as they situated themselves in their seats, all lined up side by side on a high platform. Most noticeable was one gentleman who sat near the center of the panel, right above the UCC emblem. He was speaking with the judge about something and casting brief glances down at Storm. Unlike the other panel members, he wore an admiral's uniform and had long white hair tied in a tail. It was obvious he was someone important since he was allowed to deviate from the dress code as such. Then again, his face could have done the trick by itself. Cold and hawkish, with dark eyebrows sweeping down over piercing eyes. Even from where Storm sat it was apparent this was the sort of man you didn't want to cross under the wrong circumstances.

"Who's the evil sorcerer-looking guy?" Storm asked, recognizing the man but not recalling a name.

Looking up briefly, Benson made a face—something bordering on terror. "That's Foreman Ketch. He's one of the higher-ups. An admiral or ambassador or something like that. Sometimes he stops by a hearing to preside over things, but he's not part of the actual process."

Just then, a klaxon sounded, and any idle conversations within the hall came to an abrupt halt. Benson stopped doodling on his laptop and looked up as a pair of

remote camera modules floated over to focus on their table. Nearer to the platform, two more modules took up their places before the sedate-looking council members.

The hearing began.

"The United Council recognizes case number 0237439-B: Storm Anderson, represented by Andrew Benson. Mr. Benson, please address the panel now."

Storm watched with a mixture of curiosity and dread as Benson left the table and walked out onto a circular platform, which levitated (at his command) until he was face-to-face with the panel. A spotlight from above shown down on him, presumably for the video cameras. The effect was quite dramatic—more of a stage play than a council hearing.

The judge cleared his throat as, beside him, Ketch observed with his hands clasped beneath his chin.

"Mr. Benson. On the night of June 18, 2304, your client visited the East Cedar Time Mall for a routine streaming session, during which time he, intentionally or by accident, left his birth stream. Is this information correct?"

Benson cleared his throat. "Yes, Your Honor."

"Is your client aware of the implications, legal and otherwise, of such an event?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"How does your client plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Please continue, then."

Another fit of phlegm and Benson continued (by now his brow had begun to glisten with tiny beads of sweat): "Your Honor, I would like to assure the panel that the incident in question is nothing more than an accident. My client's intent was not to deceive or test the law in any way. I would like to suggest that the fault does not lie with Mr. Anderson, but with East Cedar's equipment."

"Your evidence to support this?"

Tapping the controls of his platform, Benson floated up to the judge and handed him a memory card. "I present to the panel a surveillance video taken on the night of the incident."

The judge took the card and inserted it into his personal terminal as Benson reclaimed his former position several feet back from the panel. Momentarily, all the council members' terminals came to life as they reviewed the footage and discussed it amongst each other. Storm, below, watched and waited, noting that Foreman Ketch was eyeing him instead of the footage.

"Mr. Benson," the judge said after a few minutes' discussion. "Once in his current stream, did your client make any attempt to immediately notify the authorities as to what had happened?"

"Er, no, not immediately, Your Honor. But let me stress the fact that my client was distraught—"

"Is your client aware that it is a felony to conceal inter-stream activity? Why didn't Mr. Anderson simply notify the authorities?"

Benson didn't answer right away, but rather looked like he was losing a game of poker. He bit his lip nervously before replying: "Your Honor, I would like to

suggest further investigation of this case by a third party, as the exact cause of my client's accident has obviously not yet been determined."

A moment of brief discussion between the council members, then, "Very well. The Council will appoint an investigative agent to study the case. In the meantime, Mr. Anderson will be required to serve time in a court-appointed community service program in order to pay off the damages inhered by the possible misuse of the East Cedar Mall's equipment, as it has not been ascertained which party is guilty. We will meet again when proper evidence is presented to us through the third party agent. Mr. Benson, you are dismissed."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

With a fair amount of haste, Benson bowed away and returned to where Storm was half standing, half sitting, not sure if he should be disappointed, outraged or both.

"That was it?" Storm asked incredulously as the security guard nudged him in the direction of the exit.

With a less-than-comforting shrug, Benson nodded as he gathered his things. "You're not actually being charged with anything, so that's a plus for now. On the bright side, the Council is willing to work with us."

Storm's voice rose a notch, his anger winning out over his disappointment. "So, this means I'm guilty until they can prove otherwise?" When Benson didn't answer, Storm's mood only darkened. "What the hell kind of lawyer are you?"

The answer was, of course, that Benson was the kind of lawyer who was satisfied enough with his meager life to go on living off the government payroll as his client was dragged away into oblivion.

As he caught his last glimpse of the Council courtroom, Storm realized there were no rules to the galaxy anymore, no order—no justice. DK had been right: Whoever had the power used it as they pleased, and whoever didn't either kept to themselves (if they were smart) or got swept under the carpet.

And I sure as hell don't have any power.

His former life had come to an end.

14. Moon 608

Though no one came right out and stated it officially, Storm knew he'd been sentenced to a lifetime of labor on an "undisclosed" moon at the edge of the human sector, some hunk of rock and ice that had been converted into a manufacturing facility where supposedly criminal workers were gathered to build and maintain spacecraft components, planetary development tools, and the like. The facility itself was dull and heavy, a labyrinth of metallic domes glinting in the indigo-hued air beneath an artificial satellite in low orbit.

The first day was hell. Storm was herded (along with several dozen other newly-arrived convicts) off the shuttle and into a main lobby, where assistant drones approached each prisoner and performed the chore of undressing and disinfecting the new arrivals. Along the perimeter, guards equipped with heavy laser rifles observed without expression.

The process of disinfecting was not pleasant, and involved the removal of all body hair, from head to toe (save for minor important bits such as eyelashes and eyebrows). At the touch of a specific instrument, Storm was engulfed in what felt like a cloud of microscopic razorblades for a moment as all the follicles in his skin died. His groin clenched involuntarily as the process rendered him sterile—had it not been for the drone's firm clamps holding him around the arms and shoulders, he would have convulsed and possibly fallen forward onto the floor.

One more buzz from the drone and suddenly the pain became an uncertain tingling as small nanites crept along his limbs and torso, spewing out a gelatinous substance that spread rapidly over his body and formed into a bright orange skinsuit that had his ID number printed on chest and back—organic clothing, a man-made extension of his own skin, molded to fit his body so that there were no folds, no creases in which weapons could be hidden.

The entire process took no more than a minute. There was hardly any time for Storm to be concerned about what was happening until he stood in line, wrists chained to a group of three other individuals (one man, two women), before a door marked "Orientation." Once all prisoners had been conditioned, the door swished open and the guards ushered them into a small auditorium with bare, windowless, dark gray walls. Everyone was seated, and silence was called for, though the majority of the people present were already quiet as they tried to adjust to the metallic taste in their mouths.

As Storm took his seat, he glanced quickly at his companions. The man was tall, fit, and wore a cold expression, as if he'd done time elsewhere prior to his being brought here. One of the women was Asian, full-figured—very attractive save for a

rather nasty scar that ran across her cheek. The other woman was Caucasian, pale and slightly malnourished looking.

She returned his gaze briefly, an odd sort of recognition evident in her expression. Like everyone else present, her age was evasive; she could have been eighteen, she could have been twenty-eight. There was youth and maturity in her, and neither quality seemed to prevail.

(Storm wondered if, since leaving his own stream, he was exhibiting the same manifestations of ambiguous youth.)

Momentarily, a man dressed in a general's uniform entered the room and took the podium. He was middle-aged, judging by his whitened hair and beard, but in remarkable physical condition. He also had an ironclad expression on his face, the kind of facial mold that said, "I've seen the Outer Wars firsthand and lived to tell about it; I've been left for dead in Siberia with nothing more than a knife and a pack of chewing gum, and here I stand before you, alive and well. Anyone here with more impressive credentials, please stand and I will break your neck."

There was ample reason to believe that Storm wasn't the only one who suddenly stopped worrying about not having any pubic hair.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the general said, smirking slightly. "Allow me to welcome you to your new home. I am General Oro, your new unquestioned master. From this moment on, you are the property of the KenDyne Manufacturing Plant, which means that you belong to me. Your sole purpose is to aid in the manufacturing of materials for the Galactic Development Alliance. In exchange for said duties, you will be allowed to keep your lives.

"The rules here are simple. Work hard and you will find things bearable, maybe even enjoyable. Misbehave, and you will be tossed out the nearest airlock. No excuses, including inability to work, since our medical drones can pretty much fix anything short of a severed head. You will either grow accustomed to the work, grow strong, or you will die. Either way, at the end of the day, I will think no more of you than I did the day before." A pause as Oro glanced at his wristwatch. Then: "It's 1300 hours, which means you still have quite awhile before your bedtime. I think you'll find plenty to keep you busy until then. You will be assigned a position in our rotating group roster. Don't get too attached to anyone or anything or you'll only make your stay here more inconvenient than it really is.

"Lastly, remember this: When you're not working, you're sleeping. When you're not sleeping you're working. I am a man tolerant of those two activities, nothing more. Good day."

Oro left the podium, his guards stepping in to handle the rest.

"911," one said, addressing Storm. "You are appointed ringmaster of your group. At the end of your shift, it will be your duty to make sure your cellmates make the best of their shower time before lights out. It will also be your duty to make sure they are awake and ready when the next shift begins at 0600. Understood?"

Storm nodded as he and the others were hustled onward.

Evidently, time was of the essence, even to those for whom time no longer had

meaning.

* * *

Oro liked to shake things up from the start. He assigned Storm's group to one of the mines where fresh mineral deposits had to be extracted and processed for use in the manufacturing plant. Their instructor was female, a woman named Camie who evidently led a double life as a professional bodybuilder, judging by her massive physique. Surprisingly, she was a prisoner herself; she was hairless and wore her ID number on both her skinsuit and forehead.

"This isn't a hard job," she said, addressing Storm's group. "A family of baboons could easily capture these deposits. Unfortunately, since baboons don't do well in extraterrestrial environments, we'll have to use the next best thing." She paused for a moment. Nobody laughed. "Now then. Let's get down to it. Follow me, and don't stick your hand through the forcefields unless you want to lose it."

They took an elevator down into the heart of the mine, where Camie instructed everyone to hold their hands up above their heads as she fetched a remote control from her waist pouch. At the click of a button, everyone's handcuffs morphed into MI bracelets.

"Everyone will need an oxygen mask and a sonic drill," Camie said, handing out the equipment. "Your cuffs are temporarily being replaced by the MI bracelets, which will allow you to move pretty freely around inanimate objects—but *only* inanimate objects. Not people. Try anything funny and you'll get juiced so sharply you'll forget your own name."

As he donned his mask and drill, Storm caught a few other prisoners giving Camie's remote control envious glances. Nobody, however, looked as if they were scheming to steal it just yet, as Camie was obviously someone to reckon with. Her skinsuit showcased every inch of her bulging, chiseled torso; it would take someone with the same brawn to even challenge her, much less defeat her in battle...unless she was outrageously stupid in some mental way. But no, Storm's thoughts weren't that far ahead. He could ponder escape, but had no idea where he would escape *to*. The mining complex appeared to be a network of narrow tunnels surrounded by an intolerable atmosphere, impossible to traverse on foot. There would be no old-fashioned Earth-style jail-breaking around here.

Besides these formidable obstacles, Storm was still in shock over his situation. It was almost like sleepwalking: following his team down into a mining vault, listening distantly to what Camie had to say about the drills, then letting his body take over as the real work began.

Ganymite was basically extracted in large chunks from the cavern walls, delivered to the receptacles, which processed the ore into chunks that had to be manually loaded onto wagons for delivery to the mineral refinery. After three hours of drilling and lifting—wanting to wipe the sweat from his brow, forgetting about the facial mask and having to let it soak his face, burn his eyes—he was dog-tired.

Apparently, so was another of the prisoners, a beefy, swollen-looking man who

looked as if he had never been accustomed to physical labor of any kind. His body bulged and sagged obviously beneath the material of his suit as he leaned against his drill and tried to defog his mask, which seemed to be malfunctioning. After a moment, one of the rifled guards approached him. Everyone else watched half-heartedly, but kept to their work.

"LT-26C-341," asked the guard, calling the prisoner by ID number. "Why have you stopped working?"

LT looked up, facial expression hidden by the condensation on his mask. "Why the fuck do you think?"

"Inappropriate language is not allowed. Correct yourself immediately or you will be disciplined."

"This is bullshit," LT responded harshly, letting his drill fall to the ground. "I can't see a damned thing. How do you expect me to work under these conditions?"

The guard ignored the question and grabbed LT by the head, evidently intent on correcting his behavior before anything else. "You have been warned, LT-26C-341." Immediately, a stream of nanites began to flow from the guard's fingers and into LT's ears. He squirmed and kicked for a moment, but the guard didn't seem to feel any of it, and suddenly LT screamed, his limbs convulsing. It all happened very quickly. After a moment, he quieted, and the guard let go as he returned to his work, all desire to complain gone. From where Storm watched, it looked like blood was leaking from his ears.

"There is always an example," muttered someone behind Storm. He turned and saw a taller man standing beside him, working steadily at the rocky wall. The details that showed through his face mask indicated he was not human—

"DK?" Storm hissed.

DK nodded. "Storm. Hello again." He smiled briefly, then nodded in LT's direction. "Every new shipload and Oro has dinner theater performed, to make sure everyone understands there is no fooling around on the job."

Storm glanced again at LT, who seemed to be quite content despite his recent ordeal. "What did they do to LT-what's-his-name?"

"Only what he has been programmed for. My guess is that he is an android, like most of the guards. They do not typically treat humanoids like that, but they want you to believe they do."

"How do you know?"

"I have never seen one without his helmet, but the same fat man complains about his mask not working, and he gets corrected every time, and then I never see him again until the next time. It is obvious, I think."

"Figures," Storm muttered.

"They must keep us in line. They do not treat us bad here, but they want us to know they would, if necessary."

DK fell silent as a guard passed their way. It was hard to believe it was a machine, the way it walked just like a human. Storm hadn't seen many of those on Earth, thanks to human rights activists—though it did make more sense to keep androids out where the work was tough, the environment unforgiving.

Once the guard had passed, Storm whispered, "If LT had been human, what would have happened to him?"

"Brainwashing, though I have not seen it much since people prefer the work over losing their will to live. The android sends in a fleet of nanotech bugs to reorganize your braincells—like programming a computer, yes? Uploading a new program, flushing out or deleting unnecessary files. They have bugs for everything here. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the medicine we take. Every part of our lives here is controlled by computer."

Storm nodded, falling silent as he knocked a chunk out of the wall and hefted it in his arms. *What a way to live,* he thought. *Your head hollowed out, only the bare necessities there to keep you working as long as your body lives.*

On Earth, there was always the rumor that nanotech was being misused in such a fashion. However, the government was good at hiding its secrets, and that sort of thing was just another entry on the What-If? list. Nevertheless, how many other prisons in the galaxy were using the same technology to keep their inmates in line?

The message was clear: do what you're told or the bugs will eat your brain.

* * *

Downtime came just when Storm thought he would have to try sleeping standing up while simultaneously operating his drill. Camie called out for everyone to return their equipment and head for the lift. She reinstated everyone's shackles as the guards began reorganizing the prisoners back into groups.

"See you tomorrow," DK said, brushing past Storm, who looked up briefly and caught sight of his scaly, pseudo-human face—set in a mischievous smirk. He wondered if DK always looked like that.

Once everyone had been accounted for, Camie brought the group back up to ground level and sent them off to their respective bunkers, which were unisex. Storm's co-workers were also his cellmates.

"Lights out in thirty minutes," said the guard as he ushered Storm's group into their cell. There was a pair of bunks, and a small shower compartment and toilet in the back. The door swished shut and a hum filled the room. Storm felt his skin tingling and looked down to see his MIs dissolving, along with the entirety of his skinsuit. He glimpsed the tiny nanites trickling down between his toes and into the grated floor. Looking up, he saw his companions were equally bare. There were no bedclothes.

Only the first few moments of seeing each other naked was uncomfortable. The day's work had taken its toll. A shower and a good night's rest was all anyone cared about at this point. Storm's male cellmate didn't bother to introduce himself; he merely availed himself of the shower. Storm decided to call him by the first two letters of his ID number: HP. The Asian woman, whose ID number started with NC, made it clear she was next in line, while JT (the two-pounds-away-from-anorexia girl) was third. Nobody spoke to each other where motions could convey the necessary thoughts.

When it was Storm's turn, he stepped onto the mat, leaned against the wall, and tapped the controls, encasing himself in the spray, which began to work the sweat and grime from his skin. A small mirror had been set into the wall, and for the first time since coming here, he was able to see what he looked like. The reflection was a bit shocking. Across his forehead, the permanent markings that read, "SA-00X-911" reminded him of a price tag.

He finished his shower and crawled into bed, where he fell asleep instantly.

15. Man Made of Screens

Via a secure chat:

Em_zayers: Knock-knock.

2max1176: Who's there?

Em_zayers: Wouldn't you like to know?

2max1176: Answering a question with another question, Gregori? Do you still think you are a poet? Or has the artificial gravity gone to your head?

Em_zayers: A little of both.

2max1176: So, how are things on your side of the rock?

Em_zayers: Intolerable, as always. Oro's roster system is going to be the death of me. Last month I exceeded my quota of orders processed and was consequently promoted another level. Now I'm allowed a corner "office," if you can call it that, and a larger quota during work shifts.

2max1176: Poor Gregori. Gods forbid you should be forced to spend your waking hours sitting behind a desk while I and the rest of the musclebound grunts in the manufacturing sector have to break our backs hauling spaceship guts around the warehouse all day.

Em_zayers: I take care of you, don't I?

2max1176: Of course. That is why we have a business partnership. So, what is on your mind?

Em_zayers: Time, DK. Time. Today I turn fifty. My life would otherwise be half over, were it not for my present physical condition.

2max1176: I will make you a cake.

Em_zayers: I do hope that is not a jest at my expense.

2max1176: Of course not. I am just playing with the fire, as usual.

Em_zayers: Indeed. I look back at our youthful days with quite some fondness. I will never be able to wrestle like that again. But I suppose it's the price paid by those who enter into dangerous partnerships without watching their backs.

2max1176: You are…what is the word for full of thought?

Em_zayers: Thoughtful. Philosophical.

2max1176: Yes.

Em_zayers: Why, so I am. Ages on this blasted moon, waiting patiently while my body turns to gel. It has brought about a newfound desire to see the outside world once again before I die. To escape Oro's prison before the prison of the flesh collapses around me.

2max1176: Do not talk like that. You are breaking my heart.

Em_zayers: You know I don't walk on egg shells. Too much time has passed since our last great scheme. At the very least, I would like to try once again before I relegate myself to infinity. What news have you of this year's prospective candidates?

2max1176: Funny you should ask now. It has been relatively quiet these last few years, but I have had the chance to meet a young human who has recently been stationed in the mining sector. He works obediently, is sound of body, and is very favorable with the females. He does not cause trouble, and he talks only to a small group of friends whom he has stood up for intensely during downtime brawls in the mines or recreational areas. Loyalty to the people he deems worthy. He is the kind of man who takes it seriously while the rest of us have lost our minds, yes?

Em_zayers: In other words, with the right influences, he's programmable?

2max1176: I would say yes. It may be harder than trying to hold your breath outside the dome, but he is a very good choice. He has power in him, like Camie, only I think there is more opportunity here. I will send you a photograph.

Em_zayers: What about assets?

2max1176: He has a circle of friends. A human woman named Jennie, and

surprisingly, our friendly warden, Camie.

Em_zayers: Really now?

2max1176: Not obviously, but there is a chemistry between them. They are both kindred spirits. Both of them are nice people sent here on accident. Besides that, I study humans closely, and I can tell when a female is considering a male in a sexual manner. She is too proud to admit it, but she wishes a relationship with the newcomer.

Em_zayers: You're sure of all this, now?

2max1176: Very nearly. I will be studying further—you will visit us in the pub tomorrow, yes?

Em_zayers: Weather permitting.

2max1176: Silly Gregori. There is no weather here.

Em_zayers: I was making a joke.

* * *

Storm didn't think about sex at first. Initially, it was all work, sleep, work, sleep, and trying to get used to things in between. He and his cellmates adapted relatively quickly, though it was difficult. Early on, weeping in the darkness during downtime was commonplace, but gradually the pain and soreness of labor faded into the background as his accentuated muscles adjusted to their new workload, as his mind became more attuned to deeper thought. Somewhere along the way, he actually began considering his new home a tolerable hell. Eventually, even, he slipped into a sort of satisfied state, doing his work, talking on and off to DK or, more rarely, JT (who eventually admitted her first name was Jennie).

HP and NC paired up rather quickly, taking to rather uninhibited (and sometimes sadistic) coupling during the night. Though the pitch black darkness hid them from view, the sounds they made only reminded Storm of his own needs.

Jennie kept to herself at first, giving no indication whatsoever that she desired intimacy (or any other social interaction, for that matter) of any shape or form. In fact, she was the last person Storm would have thought he'd be sharing a bed with until one day, just before lights out, she quite unexpectedly made the request.

"You fine with oral?" she asked, matter-of-factly as she stepped from the shower pad and folded her arms across her chest.

Storm was taken aback (despite the obvious intentions behind Oro's pairing up male and female workers). His impression of Jennie had nothing sexual to it. Even

now, with several months of lean muscle on her to replace the boniness, she simply seemed too frail. Still, it wouldn't be altogether unpleasant to have someone for a night, even Jennie...

"Fine with me," he replied.

"Okay, then. After lights out."

Jennie left him, climbed into her bunk and faced the wall in her usual manner. Despite the businesslike formality of her request, he found himself shamefully eager at the thought of physical intimacy—even if it was to be strictly oral.

He got into bed and waited. Eventually the cell plunged into darkness. Storm fidgeted, his heart fluttering. He tried to think of Trudie, stuck in her wheelchair somewhere and waiting for him; he'd left her once, and now he'd done it again—indefinitely. She was dead to him now, a distant memory. Her and everyone else from his former life. It was incredibly depressing—and yet, in this moment, he was still unbelievably aroused, insatiably eager.

That's all it is, he told himself. *A bodily function. There's no disease here, no pregnancy, no mornings after. Just a goodnight quickie.*

Mind swimming, senses reeling, he heard Jennie slip from her bunk, felt her climb onto his. He couldn't see in the darkness, but he could feel her motions as she moved between his legs, hesitated only momentarily before going to work on him. Modesty was pointless in such cramped quarters, especially since he'd already been naked in front of his cellmates (and listened to their own fornicating during nights), but he attempted it anyway. It wasn't easy: Jennie had an experienced touch, an aggressive technique. His restraint seemed to amuse her, and she even laughed quietly once she'd finished him off.

"Now *that* was a storm," she whispered.

Storm groaned inwardly as he sat up, certain that if HP and NC had slept through the preliminaries, they were for sure awake and aware by now. Nevertheless, he leaned forward and gently pushed Jennie onto her back. Thanks to his template, his refractory period was nearly non-existent; he briefly considered returning the favor and then some—but Jennie's earlier invitation had been for oral specifically. So, he stuck with the itinerary. There was no cuddling and cooling afterward. Jennie politely thanked him for his services and slid from his bunk. He leaned back and listened to the sound of the shower as she rinsed off and then climbed wordlessly into her bed. He followed suit, amazed at how lightly he'd taken the affair. Only after he'd cleaned up, only when he was lying back in his bunk and drifting off to sleep did he think again of Trudie. And even then she was still a far-off memory, a temporary holding spot in his life lost to time. Fooling around with her hadn't been much different than fooling around with Jennie; in both cases it was a service, a machination followed by the inevitable loneliness.

A part of him was saddened by this realization, and he found himself sobbing, scolding himself over the sort of man he'd become—but then again, this was what he'd been bred for: physicality, sensuality. His parents' idea of bliss.

The roots had always been there; it had merely taken them a while to grow.

* * *

General Oro might have had the reputation of a hellish tyrant, but in actuality he treated his "employees" rather well after the initial shakedown. The first six months was all obedience and conditioning, a reminder to everyone that they were there to work, that there was no room for laziness or fooling around. Storm discovered, however, that there *was* room for living. Halfway through his first year on the station, his work schedule (as well as the schedules of most of the others who'd come aboard with him) was shifted to allow for several hours of free time before lights-out. Workers were allowed to do pretty much whatever they wanted, albeit in the presence of the ever-vigilant guards.

Most understood and accepted these terms. The few who didn't, either by refusing to work or attempting to escape, were personally dealt with by Oro in the form of brutal public beatings and sentencings to time in solitude.

Storm steered clear of such trouble, sticking to his work and routine visits to the recreational sector. He only crossed the general once, in the cafeteria: HP was in the arcade area that day, jousting with another worker and apparently not taking his losing streak too well. When the final match was called in favor of his opponent, he threw down his baton and let loose. Storm, who'd been sitting with DK on the dining tier, immediately rushed down and restrained his cellmate, who managed to dish out several damaging blows despite the fact that he was wearing his MIs.

A trio of guards stepped in momentarily and separated everyone, detaining each of them until Oro arrived. Storm waited silently along with the others, blood trickling from his nose, breath coming in gasps from what felt like a broken rib. The general, accompanied by a med drone, eventually made his appearance. He looked none too happy about being disturbed from his normal work schedule.

"Gentlemen," he said in his usual slow, barely-tempered manner, "I trust there's a good explanation behind this?" He approached Storm and tapped him on the chest—a particularly painful experience at the moment. "911—you're in charge of this sorry brute, yes?"

"HP's my cellmate, yes, sir," Storm replied, wincing from the pain.

"And you let him get out of hand?"

I'm not a babysitter, Storm wanted to say, but checked himself, and instead responded: "He just became a little overexcited during the game, sir."

"Hmf." There was something of an amused twinkle in Oro's eyes. He nodded and tapped Storm's chest once again as he signaled for the drone to begin repairing his wounds. Then he turned and faced HP. "Your explanation, 756?"

HP made no effort to control himself. "Krueger was playing dirty. I was only leveling the playing field."

Oro had a multi-unit with him, which he used to quickly replay surveillance footage of the jousting match. When he was through, he tucked the device away and stepped up to HP.

"Judging from the video, I'd say *you* were the problem here. Sloppy grip on the

baton, too much weight on your left foot while taking a hit—not good when someone wants to take you down. Is it at all possible that you just aren't any good at the game?"

The crowd cooed.

"Why don't you try me?" HP answered.

Something in Oro's demeanor went ice cold. "756, before I continue, do you have any injuries that need looking after by the drone? No? That's good." With a sudden unexpected motion, he smacked HP hard across the face with the back of his fist, tearing flesh, eliciting blood. He gestured at the guard. "No meds for Mr. Tough Guy here. He can obviously take care of himself. Take him to isolation."

With that, Oro exited the arcade, leaving the remaining guards to look after the drone until it finished its work. When it was through, it released Storm, who flexed his arms, took a deep breath, and found there was little more than some residual soreness to remind him of his injury. Even with the MIs on, it felt little different than having done some moderate weight-lifting the day before.

Thank God for modern medicine, he thought as he made his way out of the arcade, past the swarms of chuckling onlookers, and back to the dining tier.

DK snorted playfully. "Good show. Do you do dinner theater as well?"

"Don't start," murmured Storm. He reclaimed his seat at their table and tapped in an order for water (alcoholic beverages weren't allowed). He downed the entire glass and leaned back, closing his eyes and thinking of something DK had taught him. Something to do with self-control, relaxation. It was all Gecko spiritual pap, but it came in handy whenever he was affected by stress. If he concentrated hard enough. Sometimes the concentration itself became too stressful and he had to simply think of nothing in order to calm himself. What had DK called it? Zerostate?

"Are you all right?"

Storm came out of his reverie and found Jennie standing beside him. She was halfway through a glass of some kind of dark cider. "Couldn't be better. HP's got strength like the rest of us, but he just kind of throws it around. No precision."

"So, you are a professional fighter, yes?" DK jested.

"I hate the creep," Jennie said, taking a seat. "Looks at me the wrong way while I'm showering. I swear, if he ever tries anything during lights out..."

"He's not that much of a creep," Storm said. "He's pretty much like the rest of us after hours: too tired to give a damn about anything but a good night's rest. He's the first one asleep when the lights go out—unless his gal is in the mood."

Jennie snorted, finishing off her drink and making eye contact with Storm (something she'd been doing more and more often as time passed). "Do you know her name—or his name, for that matter?"

"No, and that suits me just fine."

"Same here." Jennie twirled her empty glass in a clockwise fashion. "So, we've been shacking up for a while now, you and I—would that make us friends?"

Storm blushed. On 608, everyone shacked up; it was part of General Oro's Utopian plan and everyone knew it—yet Storm still treated his own trysts as if it

were something private. “Of course,” he said, “if it had been the Asian girl on the top bunk instead of you…”

Jennie scowled and stuck her tongue out at him. “She’s too small to be the monster-meat type. She’d wind up a smidgen on your sheets.” She laughed. “Anyway, since we’re all so chatty today, let’s swap stories. You first, Storm.”

“Let’s see,” he replied, sighing. “I’m Earthborn, San Fran. A model and an athlete until I told my parents to go screw themselves.”

“And the bod? A birthday present?”

“You could say that. I tried not to use it as a crutch. After high school, I got myself a nice little job fixing shuttles. I was twenty-four when I took a ride in the wrong booth at a time mall. It knocked me off course by two years. They say I should have been killed, but here I am, having drinks in hell instead.”

“Wow,” Jennie said, raising her eyebrows. “You’re just a baby.”

“How old are you?”

Jennie shrugged. “Who knows? I was forty-seven when I first broke my birth stream, and that was a while ago.”

“Jesus,” said Storm, incredulous. “I’m young enough to be your son.”

“Nice sentiment, though we all even out once we break our streams. But if bagging older women turns you on—”

Storm held his hand up. “Enough. How about you, DK?”

“A citizen of time,” said DK, smiling. “There is no doubt you know of my people’s relationship with the human Patrol. I was raised as a protector of the old ways. My first experiences came at a Mars rally. Human engineers were installing new gravitational field generators—they said it was to improve streaming accuracy for the human sector, but we knew there were certain of our own neighboring streams that would have been canceled out if there was the slightest miscalculation. Most of us were captured, and the generators went online anyway, but my sensei took me off-stream, and we went into hiding. Shortly after that, the first ‘mistake’ happened, and a major bloodline on the Gecko Homeworld was lost. I joined a rebel clan, then, and worked on cross-streaming in the Outer Wars—trying to confuse the Patrolmen long enough so that our brothers could defend themselves. That was nearly seventy years ago.”

“Seventy years!” Storm shook his head. Outwardly, DK was a robust youth, Jennie a disgruntled college student—but then again, Storm had seen the evidence himself while examining his own face in the mirror. Gone were the innocent, barely noticeable creases around his eyes, the laugh lines flanking his mouth, the certain subtle scars he’d earned during boyhood jaunts. Free of his birth stream, he looked twenty-ish again, with the only evidence of passing time being measured by the size of his newly-adjusted muscles, the number of new memories set against the sterile backdrop of Moon 608.

He had to bite his lip from slipping into another reverie. “What about you, Jennie? What was your old life like?”

“It wasn’t much of a life,” she replied. “I had my kids, paid my taxes, and put up with an asshole of a husband for twenty years. After that, I decided to leave it all

behind. I had friends who dabbled in chasing, though I think I was the first to actually try it. Of course, I never saw my family again, but I was free. It was a fair exchange."

Silence fell over the table as everyone pondered their own histories. It was only a brief intermission, though; DK promptly tapped Storm's hand and pointed toward the entrance. "This is your lucky day. Gregori has come."

Storm turned in his seat and watched as a cacophony of computer screens, servomechanisms, and folded flesh, all supported by an oversized hover chair (with an artificial respirator attached), drifted into the cafeteria.

Gregori, thought Storm, trying to place a face amidst the tumescent cellulite. *The Fat Man himself. God...DK has been telling the truth all this time.*

Gregori was grossly overweight, with unsightly sacks of fat hanging from arms, chest, legs, and thighs. There were deposits under his chin, in his cheekbones, globules bulging from his neck, simultaneously pulling and pushing his facial features into a permanent sneer. He was the multiplied opposite of every other man and woman on 608, as physically inadequate as could be—yet he was kept alive, kept encased to serve out his life sentence. Rumor had it he'd once been an agile chaser, but had fallen out of favor after supposedly betraying his peers. Consequently, the disgruntled party involved had infected him with a retrovirus that caused his body to produce excessive amounts of fat—a grotesque twist on the myostatin therapies used by many professional athletes. Eventually, he would be crushed under his own weight.

Various other prisoners greeted him cheerfully as he floated onto the dining tier and approached Storm's table.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he said, clasping hands with Storm, Jennie, and DK. All around him, his collection of video screens (currently muted) flickered and flashed various newsfeeds and sports broadcasts. "I am Gregori, Moon 608 pencil-pusher by day, hopeless romantic by night." He made a subtle movement with his hand and produced a rose out of thin air. He handed it to Jennie.

DK laughed. "Always on the lookout for an opportunity, yes?"

"Yes, indeed," Gregori said,

"Nano critters?" Storm asked, nodding at the rose.

"*Magic*," Gregori replied.

Storm laughed. "You're every bit as eccentric as I'd imagined."

"The benefit of a life sentence. Do you mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

Gregori adjusted his chair, tapped out his order on the tabletop. "Tell me, Storm, where do you see yourself in six months?"

"You're joking."

"Not at all." Gregori started dealing playing cards—again, from out of thin air. As he did this, he fiddled with a knob on his console so that the volume of several of his screens jumped up several decibels. Under the cover of a cacophony of conflicting video broadcasts, he continued: "Texas Hold 'Em. Have a good time,

listen—but don't *look* like you're listening. Got it?"

"Um, sure." Storm looked curiously at Jennie, who shrugged nonchalantly.

DK merely nodded and smiled amiably.

"Now, as DK mentioned, I'm always looking for opportunities. All these people"—Gregori waved one of his gelatinous hands in the air—"are from different walks of life, and they're all wearing the shackles of different transgressions leading to the same eternal damnation. We all want the same thing, when it comes down to it, but there are only a precious few who have the charisma to get it. Storm, my friend, you reek of charisma."

Storm laughed, genuinely amused. "I have a fan, do I?"

"An interested party," Gregori corrected. "I'm an aficionado of want, an archaeologist of need. You may have heard there's a Tooth Fairy roaming around the station, you may have even returned to your cell one night and found a coveted item or two lying on your pillow, no note, no explanation."

"You're the Tooth Fairy."

"Not exactly. I'm more of an executive producer, a coordinator. You see, whether by law or by nature, I'm condemned to a life sentence—but I'm as immortal as the next chaser. Hence the chair, the office job—the moderate freedom in captivity. Even for a scum-bucket like myself, Oro has allowed a certain amount of pity. He knows I will never live to see the light of day again, so he's given me certain privileges as a general overseer of inmate satisfaction. No frills are allowed, of course, but if the workers can be kept modestly happy, why it's the best of both worlds. What Oro doesn't know, however, is that, as I'm doing him a favor by smuggling amenities between the domes, my beneficiaries are doing *me* a favor by providing security, a savings plan for the days when I need to make a withdrawal. And my men and women are more than happy to lend a helping hand if it guarantees them cigarettes and booze and novelty diversions. So I bide my time. I try to stay out of trouble, I study the opportunities, and you, my dear Mr. Anderson, have caught my eye."

Storm raised an eyebrow. "Me?"

"Let me ask you: what basic principle guides all men and women in the galaxy to lie, cheat, steal, and all that good stuff? Sex. Love's a term used in greetings cards. *Sex* is the ultimate goal, the mover and shaker of our precious, precious genetic material—and that's what really matters, right? Getting our DNA from point A to point B, and it's all dependent on how we utilize our flesh machines. Now, a man such as yourself, you have the good looks, the sound body, and, most importantly, the personality to direct your way effortlessly through the social minefield. Yet here you are, plucked chicken-clean and painted orange and taking orders from a fleet of drones. Unless you start directing things."

Gregori paused, the edges of his lips curling upward into a smile. He wanted something—that much Storm understood, but what exactly, he couldn't fathom. Storm himself had never received any under-the-table perks, though his cellmates had—*and I'm the one he's asking for the return favor?*

"I'm not sure I get you," Storm said, slowly.

There was very nearly visible light in Gregori's eyes now. He glanced toward the cafeteria entrance. "Camie has a thing for you."

Storm turned slightly to watch as Camie, who'd just walked in, ambled over to an empty table and ordered herself something to eat. "Where the hell do you get that idea from?"

"I've been here a while. I know people. I know how they react to each other. I've done favors for Camie in the past. Sometimes we have a drink together and she tells me little tidbits about herself. I've ascertained the fact that she hasn't had a man in years. Says she gave them up after a handful of bad experiences during her Earthbound days—but you, you're the first guy she's even *considered*. You didn't hear that from me, though."

Storm glanced again at Camie, who nursed her drink, staring down at the table. She was as muscular as Gregori was fat, her bodybuilder's frame seemingly in a constant state of flexion despite her being relaxed. Even if he *was* interested in a relationship with her, just the thought of anything more intimate than a goodnight kiss was daunting.

"Yeah," he said after a moment. "You must be right. The way she's just sitting there, not paying me any attention at all, the way she's not said two words to me the whole time I've been here. God, how could I pass *that* up."

Jennie hit him—gently enough so that her MIs wouldn't act up. "*I'm* your bitch, don't forget."

Gregori chuckled again, giving Storm the finger. "Your sarcasm will be the death of you, my boy. I'm telling you, she's not the type of woman you'd expect at all. And I'm not just talking about those biceps. She's a thinker, a loner, someone who doesn't really belong here but, well, here she is anyway—sort of like you, if you get my drift."

"Are you trying to set me up?"

"That would be a waste of my time, wouldn't it? No, I study social patterns. I work for Oro—we all do—but I also work for *us*. And when the pendulum swings in our favor...well, it's merely been in the back of my mind how you've earned a good, solid reputation as a worker and a citizen of Oro's little planetoid hole. No one expects the slightest bit of trouble from you. Camie's been promoted to head warden of the prisoner sector, which means she's almost a free woman—as free as you can get with a life sentence, anyway."

"Do go on."

"The point is, she'll have direct access to certain areas of the station computer. That's a door for us, you see? A way out. Everything is computer-controlled. All we need is a key."

Jennie shook her head. "She can't be approached. Camie's deep-space cold. Seems to enjoy the bureaucracy of 608."

"Ah," said Gregori, "but if only she had someone to keep her warm at night, someone to open her heart as well as her mind...you think maybe then she'd find something worth rocking the boat?"

A collective understanding was reached, and everyone looked tentatively at

Storm, who felt something stir inside him—something he'd worked hard to suppress during his time in prison.

Hope.

"You want me to seduce Camie," he said.

"Descriptives are hardly necessary," Gregori said. "I mean, we're talking about a chance at freedom here. You do this one little thing, and I can guarantee us accommodations off this godforsaken rock."

Storm smiled, shaking his head and laughing lightly.

"What's so funny?" Jennie asked.

"We don't know him," Storm said. "This could well be one of Oro's games, testing worker loyalty. We go along with Gregori, we play right into Oro's hands—I, for one, don't look forward to a month in solitude. Or worse."

DK leaned forward, serpentine tongue flicking. "Think about it, Storm."

* * *

That night, after their usual carnal ritual, Jennie capitalized on Storm's predicament.

"So, what's the offensive for our oversized warden?" she whispered, cuddling up beside him on his bunk.

"Doesn't it bother you," he said, "that some random guy I hardly know just comes up to me and suggests I sleep with Camie in the hopes that she'll turn over the key?"

"He's not some 'random' guy, he's Gregori. He's got connections. He wouldn't have approached you if he hadn't done his homework first."

"You don't know him any better than I."

"What, you think I don't talk to anyone but you anymore? Stories get around. Favors, too. Gregori's genuine."

"Still, it's creepy. I bet those screens of his have something to do with it. Probably watches us all while we're showering. And for me to simply prance up to Camie, act like I want her..."

Jennie stiffened in his arms. "Are you nuts? A chance at escape, and you're worrying about your *conscience*?"

"I can't just—"

"Storm, I'm your bedtime buddy. I like sleeping with you, but that's it. Between work and lights out, what do we have in common?"

Storm couldn't think of anything.

"That's right. Nothing. We're making the best of a situation. I don't regret it, and you shouldn't either. I'm sorry if you got attached during our time together, but that's your problem, not mine. I guess in some other stream some girl would have been lucky to date you. All the meat she could eat, and a nice guy to boot. Here, we have to improvise. I mean, do you really want to spend the rest of your life like this? I miss my hair, I miss wearing real *clothes*—I miss being able to take a walk without a drone trailing my every move. Don't you miss any of those things?"

"Yeah," Storm replied, though there wasn't much conviction in his voice. He was too caught up trying to unravel the tightness in his chest, the pulling from two opposite directions. On the one hand, he ached for freedom, the chance to rejoin the living in a world without mandatory MIs. On the other, he'd gotten so used to suppressing his own angst and homesickness that he'd almost gotten used to living on 608. Now, with a chance at escape, he had to piece together a new plan, a way to survive outside Oro's dome. It would be freedom, but he would still be on the run, he would still be disconnected from his own stream.

He simply had no idea what to do next.

* * *

Having watched Storm and Jennie together in bed, Gregori sighed wistfully and muted the volume.

The infrared catches all, my friend, Gregori thought, *and I can see that you've never been more awake. Thinking of my offer, yes, but thinking of the other things, too. You're distracted, more terrified than ever of the void just outside this prison-bubble. The vast emptiness of space seeps into you somehow; all this time now, as an immortal, and you have no one but soulless convicts to spend it with. That's why you settle for a throwaway tramp like Jennie, that's why you'll settle for Camie: routine. Predictability. It's not comfort, but it's the slightest bit of control over your life, knowing that after all you've been through, things on 608 will still be the same in a thousand years. And if you can get used to that, well, maybe you can whittle your fears down to white noise.*

He turned on Camie's camera, watched her from above, watched her musclebound form as she slept fitfully on her bunk. Physically, she was a prime specimen, but he knew her secrets...knew her weaknesses.

And you, my dear. Storm's other half. If only he knew. You've made a career for yourself out of the mundane. Civilization exiled you for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you've convinced yourself that your life here, as monotonous as it will be for centuries to come, is livable. Yet, with the slightest push, you could shine as brightly as a supernova. My only regret is that you came here so late. Had I a template like Storm's, with the charm to match, I wouldn't even have to use words to win you over. But love, sex, passion—that's for the young, the soldiers of this play called life. I am the director, the thoughtsmith who lives through his creations. Patience brings promise.

Eventually he turned off his screens and sat unmoving in the darkness until he fell asleep.

* * *

It took a week to work up the courage to approach Camie. In the meantime, Storm tried to shut himself down emotionally, tried to sort things out. During free-time opportunities in the cafeteria, he feigned fatigue, disinterest—he even

stopped sleeping with Jennie, who'd started making a habit out of mentioning Gregori's offer during the most awkward moments.

In the end, it came down to an appropriated coincidence, both Storm and Camie "happening" to be in the right place at the right time. DK had been acting as Gregori's messenger, pushing for progress; Storm had finally initiated a conversation with Camie during a ride on one of the lifts—and it was as much a genuine social activity as it was an attempt to get his peers off his back.

They talked, and Camie warmed to him instantly. They had a good enough time of it that they met for dinner later in the evening. Storm didn't push; he let things happen, pretended he was merely having a good time and not trying to follow Gregori's itinerary.

Afterwards, as they were sipping nonalcoholic wine, Camie asked, "So, how about that name of yours? Is it supposed to be a descriptive term?"

Storm shook his head. "Not really. If that had been the case, my parents would have named me 'Flex' or something."

"Really, now?" Camie laughed.

He explained his parents' pretty-boy plans.

"You didn't get on well with them?"

"There wasn't a trend either way. I guess it's just the usual apathy. You go to the clinic to have a template made for your child, you pick out just the right body, the hair, the eyes, the face, the arm and leg proportions, athletic inclination, optimum height, weight, circumcised or uncircumcised—you piece together this perfect image of what you want your child to be like, but it still comes out with its own personality. Doesn't matter how much you paid for the template."

Camie tilted her head slightly as she studied him. "You know, most guys wear their templates like jewelry, always expecting us gals to be impressed regardless of whatever kind of horrible personality might lie under the shiny exterior." She shook her head. "I can't believe we haven't spoken before today. I mean, more than just the usual technical babble during work."

"Same here." A male inmate passed by the table, giving Storm a dirty look; he ignored it and continued to return Camie's smile. "I guess with the work and the disinfection and all, casual conversation wasn't exactly on my mind."

"Yeah. The drones aren't particularly subtle in that respect—though it wasn't like I was super-feminine to begin with." Camie spread her massive arms.

"Hey, now. Big *and* beautiful. Best of both worlds."

Camie waved her hand dismissively. "Botched template job. I was supposed to be a runner. Good legs, stamina. Then I hit puberty, and my genetics ended up being a little *too* efficient. Excessive muscle gain. Mildly embarrassing at first, extremely awkward during my teens, absolutely ridiculous by the time I entered my twenties and the only work I could get involved putting on a bikini and flexing at bodybuilding competitions."

Catching the resentment in her tone, Storm nudged the conversation elsewhere. "What sort of hair did you have?"

"What?"

"Before the drones. What color was your hair?"

Camie blushed. "What color was *your* hair?"

"Blond."

"Long? Short? Curly? Straight?"

"Buzzed, most of the time."

"I was a brunette, about shoulder-length."

"Ah." Storm superimposed a mental image of hair over Camie's bald pate. "Want to swap stories?"

Camie frowned, glanced quickly around. "No. Not here. Too many eyes and ears. But I know a place."

* * *

There was an observation deck just above the transport warehouse. Most often, it was used for visual confirmation when shuttles docked; now it was a luxury box in which Storm and Camie sat together and conversed while overlooking Moon 608's frozen terrain. After only a few minutes, it became (unexpectedly) apparent to Storm just how much he had in common with Camie. Specifically, she was also the victim of a streaming accident.

"The hearing was total garbage," she said. "I hadn't done anything wrong, but the company that owned the equipment was so embarrassed that they made sure I didn't talk—they planted evidence, made sure I was sent here and not to some ordinary Earthside prison."

It had been much the same for Storm. He told her so, told her his story, and when he was finished he felt her hand slip into his—and he couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of familiarity, as if he'd met Camie somewhere long before coming to Oro's domain (though he was certain he would have remembered someone like Camie).

She must have felt it too; she settled her head against his shoulder and whispered, "I've missed this so much. Just...*talking* with someone."

"That makes two of us," Storm replied, swallowing.

He tried not to think of Gregori.

* * *

The so-called "seduction" progressed over the course of a month. Initially, Camie seemed satisfied with talk, holding hands, and the occasional kiss. Two weeks in, and he spent his first night with her in her cell. After a month, she made arrangements to be paired with him permanently.

(Jennie agreed, though Storm had the feeling it had little to do with her casual attitude regarding physical intimacy. She was no doubt expecting him to deliver on his promise: sex for freedom.)

All this happened through Storm's passive persuasion. He genuinely wouldn't have been disappointed—or heartbroken, even—if Camie had turned him down

from the start. He wasn't leading her on; rather, he was allowing her attraction for him to do the guiding...though he found himself growing more and more emotionally attached as each day passed.

Ultimately, this lead to a guilt trip unlike any Storm had experienced with any of his former girlfriends—even Jennie.

DK approached him alone in the cafeteria one day and requested a progress report, and he found himself responding defensively, telling his friend that he had no business monitoring him like a teacher would monitor a student working on a project.

"Do not forget," DK warned, "that we are still prisoners. What kind of future do you have with a woman when all you will ever share with her is the inside of a cell? How will you ever have children with the nanobots constantly suppressing your seed? What is there to do when the first elation of love settles down and your attention wanders back to the problem at hand: imprisonment?"

DK left, though his words remained—a residue.

Storm returned to Camie's cell after work. They had vigorous sex while standing on the shower pad, then went to bed. Shortly thereafter, once Camie had fallen asleep, Storm slipped from her side, quietly made his way to where her computer console was. The chair didn't quite seem to fit, the chill of the faux-leather seat numbed his bottom, the keys kept slipping elusively under his fingers —still, he managed to log into the account Camie had created for him, and opened his e-mail. He peered over his shoulder to make sure she was facing away, and sent off his password—an inevitable security breach that would ultimately allow access to the rest of Camie's computer—to Gregori.

He returned to the bed, wrapped his arms around Camie again.

"Mmm," she purred contentedly, still mostly asleep.

Please don't hate me, he thought.

16. Escape

From Earth, the explosion could be seen as a glimmer in the night sky—the uncommon birth of a miniature star at the edge of the solar system; from Storm's point of view, it was a single tear caught midway down Camie's cheek.

"I can't, Storm," she said softly, her toes and fingers planted firmly in the mesh wall. All around her, the details of her cell trickled and ran as if the materials were made of melting ice.

Storm gripped the door frame, felt gravity pulling at him from several different directions at once as somewhere in the distance an alarm klaxon choked and hiccuped beneath the louder, more ominous groan of metal giving way to enormous pressure. "Camie, please. We have to go now!"

Camie shook her head; her tears were flowing freely now. "I can't. You know that. This is where I belong, it's the only place I know."

"This isn't Moon 608 anymore—at least, it won't be very soon. The nanites are digesting everything. If you stay here you'll die."

The deck shuddered. Storm felt the door frame losing its form, felt the nano critters flowing like water along his arms. He looked down at himself, saw that his skinsuit was still intact. The anti-virus program that DK had installed was still operating, which meant he would have air and resistance pressure even without the station's life support systems, but Camie, she'd refused the skinsuit upgrade, and, consequently, her body was now smeared in tatters, like oil and dirt, that dripped off her in thick, ropey blobs. It gave her the appearance of a flesh tumor, all muscle and glistening smooth skin embedded in the crumbling bulkhead.

"Camie," Storm breathed, trying to find strength within himself. "Sweetheart, please. Don't do this."

A flex of Camie's right arm as she made a fist caused her bicep and forearm to bulge almost obscenely. "Look at me. An Earthside woman doesn't look like this. Where will I live? Where will I work? Who'll want me?"

"*I* want you. With me. Both of us, together."

"Storm...that's nice of you to say that. You're a nice guy, but you know you can't go back home. If they weren't looking for you before, they'll be combing every corner of the human sector now. I can't live jumping from stream to stream... and I can't live in the world that kicked me out, left me to eternity."

The deck was beginning to sag. Storm glanced over his shoulder, saw that the corridor had become oval-shaped. He looked back at Camie.

"Go," she said.

He ran down along the corridor and across metal beams coated with steaming

rubber as the bile rose in his stomach. He thought of Camie and all the other 608ers caught naked and helpless in the midst of death.

Gregori didn't say anything about this. Escape, yes, but taking down the whole station for the sake of ourselves? Damn it to hell...

There hadn't even been a warning. For months, the only news had been that Gregori had received Storm's computer password and was working on cracking Camie's security safeguards. Then, earlier in the evening, Storm had gotten off work and gone for a shower only to find DK waiting outside Camie's door with the anti-virus program and a simple message: *now.*

All hell had broken loose after that. Gregori's mainframe virus made quick work of the security and environmental systems. Storm, DK, Jennie, and Gregori had been spared; Camie would have been spared too, but she'd refused to join the troop.

Stubborn, stubborn Camie.

Storm made it to the transport terminal (there was no air here, as was evidenced by the half-dozen or so bodies strewn about the deck). DK, laser rifle in hand, spotted him from the inside and hauled the door open.

"Jennie and Gregori have gone," he said, his mask making his accent even thicker. "Where is Camie?"

Storm didn't answer as he pushed into the terminal, stood facing the modified helm, which warped the light, causing the room to slouch inward. He imagined Jennie's exit; she probably hadn't even said goodbye before jumping streams. Gregori might have waited a while, but being so physically limited, had probably not wanted to risk the necessity of a quick escape if things got hairy. And DK...DK was the only one here, the only other person (perhaps) alive on Moon 608.

"This is it, yes?" DK said, smiling and tapping him on the shoulder. "Where do you want to go?"

Yes, thought Storm. *This is it...but where* do *I want to go?*

Everything, every hope, every nightmare since his stationing on 608, had led up to this point, and yet it was still somehow anti-climactic. He thought of Camie, poor hulking Camie, her once-magnificent frame probably dissolved into an organic stew by now, and he realized in order to free himself, he'd destroyed her home and taken her life.

"I don't know where I want to go," he said at last, his knees buckling. "Jesus, DK...I don't know."

17. Port Carr

Somewhere else, in a stuffy motel room, Storm awoke from an extended dream as he heard a sequence of knocks at the door. For a moment he was caught between realities, uncertain as to which side of his mind he was supposed to be on—then he remembered.

Annah came inside quickly, closing and locking the door behind her and setting a large tote bag down on the floor.

"There's a department store just outside Khandu," she explained, pulling out a shirt and a pair of pants from the bag. "I hope these fit you okay. Are you feeling better?"

"Yeah," replied Storm, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His clothes had been soiled during the Underground Avenue ride. As such, he'd simply rested in bed for the evening, recovering from zerostate and watching the newsfeeds as Annah had done her shopping.

"I also got you underwear and socks," she said, digging deeper into the bag. "Oh, and Mexican food, if you feel like eating."

Storm shook his head and forced the disorientation down. "How did you pay for all this?"

"I always keep a pre-paid card on me, though it's no excuse for splurging, and I'll probably have to wean my spending for the next few weeks. But money can always be earned again. Rebuilding your life isn't as easy."

"All right," Storm said, placing his new garments beside him on the bed, "but you *do* know you could get into a lot of trouble helping me, right?"

"I don't care about that. I care about you. Now, eat."

Storm ate, tacos and quesadillas. Junk food, yes—but his efficient metabolism would hardly notice.

I can't go on like this, he thought. *I've been way too sloppy in this stream. Enough to get my head on a pike if I keep it up. And here I've drawn this poor woman into the thick of things. Twice, apparently.*

And there was Chris. He hadn't been at the rendezvous point. Storm didn't want to think about it, but it probably meant he'd gotten himself into some kind of trouble—unless he was already dead. In which case Storm's staying would undermine everything their friendship had stood for.

Storm finished his meal and pulled on his pants, moved to get out of bed. He pushed his anxiety deep down within himself and came to a conclusion about what he needed to do next.

"It's getting late," he said, walking into the bathroom to splash some water on

his face. “If we’re going to get things back on track we’d better get some sleep.”

Annah nodded in agreement, though she kept up her vigilance until both of them were in bed (and lying politely apart from each other). Eventually she drifted off, and didn’t seem to notice the light bounce of the mattress as Storm rose, put on the rest of his clothes, and slipped out into the night.

He took with him only what he needed: his mind, his body, and the renewed promise to keep his fate from affecting anyone else ever again. It was the only way, no matter how much his heart yearned for more.

* * *

Storm found transportation off Sparrow after a few hours’ worth of heavy lifting. He hired himself as an extra hand for a large freight ship that was headed for the Upper Ports space station in orbit around Sparrow.

He reached the space port at 21:00 and began planning what to do next. Most of the ships docked had already delivered their payload, their crew members tossing back drinks or spending units in the various virtual reality parlors. Storm spent his off-time wandering the corridors, waiting for the morning shift to begin. Being of civilian rank, he was limited mostly to the stores, bars, and strip clubs. He visited the former and ignored the latter, all the time watching the movements of the security guards near the shipping ports as they went through their shifts.

The opportunity to spring into action came not too long after the morning shift began. Two guards were watching over an empty terminal, and they didn’t seem all that thrilled about it. As such, it didn’t take much to attract their attention elsewhere: an equally bored hooker, wandering in from the strip of bars nearby and offering her services for a few extra units. With the terminal long forgotten, the guards approached the woman eagerly and headed toward one of the restrooms; as the door slid shut, Storm left his place near one of the viewing ports and strode toward the terminal, which, he discovered, hosted a small two-man hopper used for short-range flights. With a little effort, it would get him exactly where he wanted.

Getting into the locking system wasn’t difficult. He was a shuttle tech by trade, after all, and knew his way around most computer safeguards. The only problem arose when he tried getting through without setting off an alarm. Nine times out of ten he could pull it off, but on this occasion he wasn’t so lucky. Just as he entered the final command in the console, the hatch to the hopper’s cockpit slid open in unison with the alert drone’s sharp warning. Without a second thought Storm jumped inside, closing and locking the hatch before hastily starting the departure sequence.

Navigation was rough, due to the spontaneous nature of his leaving, but he managed to coax the shuttle away from the station and out into open space without incident.

By the time the guards got their pants pulled up and their shirts buttoned again, there was nothing left for them but an empty terminal, a dozen flashing red

lights, and the chief security officer's raging voice coming through the intercom demanding to know what had just happened.

"We just lost our jobs, that's what," muttered one of the guards, heading reluctantly toward the security console.

* * *

Port Carr's official unofficial nickname was "Port Crap," and with good cause: the small, ramshackle moon was home to some of the most controversial substances and mischievous goings on known to humankind. Many criminals were abandoned there to live out their sentences killing or being killed in a low-life ecosystem where law and order were mere distant memories of civilizations long ago and far away.

As a human, Storm was somewhere on the lower end of Port Carr's chain of significance. He easily realized this when he strode into the only organized town the moon offered. There was no name, no security, but plenty of riffraff to make him glad he'd worn the small repair laser he'd found in the shuttle.

Two female Geckos with formidably large breasts (probably implants) spotted him and waved from their spot beside an old shuttle carcass.

"Hey there, baby face," one of them greeted. "Ever have sex with a lizard?"

Storm smiled casually and walked toward them, stuffing his hands in his pockets and readying the laser. "Yeah, but she couldn't keep up."

The hookers looked incredulously at each other.

"I find that hard to believe," said one, giggling.

"Human pride," said the other. "Unless you're willing and able to prove us wrong by showing us what we're up against?"

"I might just do that," Storm said, "but first you've got to give me a little something."

"What would that be?"

"Tell me where Gregori is."

Both women looked disappointed.

"The Fat Man, eh?" snorted the second one. "Why should we tell you? We haven't been guaranteed a good time yet."

Storm held up his pre-paid card. "I pay well...if you survive the night."

The first Gecko whispered something to her friend and both nodded. "Take us to bed, and we'll tell you where to find him."

"Tell me where to find him, and then I'll take you to bed."

"All right, then. We'll take you to someone who knows him, and *then* you take us to bed. Both of us, 45 units an hour."

"Fair enough," Storm said, putting his arm around the one woman who'd been most forward.

The Geckos led him to a bar called Spike's, which was in the center of town. The place was teeming with dozens of sleazy traders and swindlers of all species. Inside, it was smoky and noisy as spectators drank themselves silly while watching a

wrestling match between a muscular, four-armed, half insect, half woman and a leonine man who looked like he was having trouble keeping on his feet. With one lousy swing of his arms he was trapped in his opponent's embrace, two arms holding, the other two pounding. As the man went tumbling to the floor with a loud grunt, the crowd cheered and screamed for more, though at the moment nobody was volunteering for the fatal task of wrestling the insect woman. She held up her arms in victory and stepped out of the way as her opponent's unconscious body was dragged out of the ring.

"Who am I looking for?" asked Storm, looking around the joint.

"Daisy deals with him directly," replied one of his escorts, pointing to the insect woman. "Talk to her."

"Thank you," Storm said, and started to leave, but the women held him back, both of their tongues tickling his cheek.

"What about our compensation?"

Storm smiled again. "Oh, yeah. Almost forgot."

They navigated through the crowd of creatures and entered the restroom at the back of the bar. The door slid shut with a muffled click, then opened a moment later as Storm stepped out again, shaking out his fists and heading for the bar. Daisy was ordering a drink before her next bout.

"Daisy?" he inquired, seating himself beside the woman's sizable frame (it was no surprise that the chairs in her immediate area were empty). He was reminded of Camie, and he wondered if maybe this wasn't an alternate incarnation.

Guzzling strong-smelling liquor from a huge tankard, Daisy regarded him with bloodshot eyes. "Yeah? And who are you?"

"Call me Storm. Do you know Gregori?"

"That's a common name."

"This is Port Carr—you know which Gregori I'm talking about."

Daisy downed the rest of her drink. "I do for people who possess a very big wallet, or other significant attributes."

"I'm a friend."

"Everyone's a *friend* around here."

"I have business with him."

"Flex for me."

Storm complied.

"Very nice. Tell you what, human. Since I'm in a good mood tonight, I'll deliver you to him—*if* you know how to handle yourself in the ring. If you can get me off my feet, you win and I take you to Gregori's place. If not, then oh well. You're out of luck and in need of urgent medical attention."

"What's the catch?" Storm replied, standing. He hoped the expression on his face was a fearless one because he was beginning to think coming here was a bad idea. He couldn't possibly hope to wrestle with this monster lady and win, yet here he was, following her to the small ring in the center of forty drunken bar-hoppers squandering their money by betting on potential Davids trying to slay Goliath. Or, in this case, Daisy.

Once everyone became aware that a new match was beginning, the noise in the bar became considerably louder. People cooed, cheered, and exchanged bets, mostly in favor of Daisy. Storm removed his shirt, hoping that his athlete's template would impress, if not intimidate, his opponent.

"The pants, too," said Daisy, putting all four of her hands on her hips. "I don't want any unexpected pocket-lasers or switchblades popping up from out of nowhere."

Storm wasn't sure if she was telling the truth or if she simply wanted to shame him witless, but he acquiesced, deciding that protest would only show his fear and uncertainty. As he stripped down to his underwear, he noticed that Daisy's body, all seven feet and three-hundred pounds of it, was unclothed. It only seemed that she wore garments because of the way her torso grew its own natural breastplates. It was almost as if she were part human and part armadillo—a formidable foe in any case.

"Let's do it then," Daisy prompted, stepping forward with a devious smile.

Immediately she lunged at him with her arms. Storm ducked out of the way, kicking her in the thigh. Without shoes it was risky business mixing his force and her firm resistance. The only way he could win this match was to make her harm herself; trying to inflict damage directly meant a possibility of damaging her while almost certainly damaging himself in the process. He would have to concentrate on tripping her or tiring her out so that she finally collapsed from exhaustion.

Giving her another tentative kick—this time a fancy one—in the back, he knew it was going to take a lot more than he had to defeat this rival. She hardly expended more energy than necessary as she swung around and nearly took off his ear with her fist. Storm dodged, dropped onto the floor, and kicked again at her ankle, which didn't budge except for when she stooped to loop one of her arms around his waist and hoist him up into the air. The ear-splitting shouts of the spectators reached a crescendo as Daisy held him with one arm, used another to ram her fist into his gut. Then she dropped him onto the floor and stepped back, waiting for his next move.

He refused to acknowledge the pain, concentrated on zerostate as he rose to his feet again, tried desperately to think of what to do next. Daisy began closing in (along with the roar of the crowd). He fell to his knees and crawled between her legs as an idea suddenly came to him. Before she could turn around, he was leaping up onto her back, wrapping his legs around her waist and his arms around her head in an effort to simultaneously blind and strangle her. She started staggering and swinging her arms wildly, and for a moment he thought he might have a chance—until he felt her steel-hard grip on his legs, unlocking them so that only his arms kept him from falling to the floor again. He tightened his grip around her neck, but it did little more than anger her further as she swiped at him with all four arms at once, two of them raking rather sharp fingernails across his skin. Crying out, he let go and fell away, tracks of blood beading on his skin.

By now the audience was going wild, yelling, "Kill! Kill!" as Daisy faced Storm with a half-annoyed, half-impressed expression on her face. In fact, she looked like

she was rolling in the grass with an old friend for kicks.

Again she moved toward him with surprising agility. He tried to leap out of the way, failed, and found himself being thrown over her shoulder. The crowd thundered as she started spanking his bottom like a mother would a child's—another example of her showmanship.

The move, however embarrassing on Storm's part, was not without its rewards; as he struggled to get a hold of one of her arms, he spotted a blessing from heaven: a hairpin nestled in Daisy's stringy bun of what passed for her species' "hair." He grabbed the hairpin, which was large, crude, sharp enough, and jabbed it underneath one of the segmented shells that protected her shoulders.

Daisy screeched and let go of him as she clawed ineffectively at the site of her wound, trying to find the source of the exquisite pain. Storm wasted no time in launching another attack, this time running at his opponent full force and knocking into her legs. That, combined with the distraction in her shoulder, was enough to send Daisy plunging downward. The crowd parted hastily as she slammed through one side of the ring, snapping the ropes and collapsing a table with her bulky frame.

Storm righted himself, blood from his own wounds running along his arms and mixing with Daisy's, which was darker, rust-tinged. Some of the crowd cheered, some booed and others simply fell silent as he found his clothes in the corner of the ring and got dressed. When he was finished, Daisy was standing again and shaking her head.

"I'll be damned," she said, chuckling. "Beaten by a human—but only because I was distracted by that *delightful* face of yours. In any event, you've earned my respect for the time being. There will be a rematch in the near future, and I assure you then I will be much more sober than tonight." There was a graveness to her face, but not without traces of humor as she put her arm around him and flashed a devilish grin. "Now, let's share a drink."

As much as he appreciated the gesture, Storm had more important matters to attend to, though he took a moment to wash himself off (during which time Daisy indulged in two more tankards of beer) and tend to his wounds before insisting that he be taken to Gregori at once.

"Very well," said Daisy, heading for the bar entrance. "Follow me, human."

18. A Conversation with the Fat Man

Gregori's shop was a clutter of wood beams and dusty stone masonry bathed in the autumn light of the setting sun. Storm was greeted at the entrance by a young woman wearing nothing but MIs and several layers of grit.

"I'm here to see Gregori," Storm said.

The woman had been working on a mechanical contraption of some sort; she set down her screwdriver and picked up a remote control. At the press of a button, four drones whizzed into view and surrounded Storm.

"Let's see your invitation," the woman said.

Storm swallowed, reached into his pocket and withdrew the scrap of paper Daisy had given him (she'd sketched a daisy on it beforehand). He handed it to the woman, who nodded and disappeared into the shop. Several minutes passed; the drones hummed and hovered, their insect-like eyes trained on Storm and no doubt ready to blast him to bits if he made the wrong move.

Presently, the young woman returned and sent the drones away. "Follow me," she said.

Inside, it was dim and musty. There were shelves, boxes, crates—all stacked neatly, though there was so much it simply wasn't possible to make the place look *clean*. Eventually, after several twists and turns, Storm found himself standing in a large office, with ornate throw rugs on the floor and antique Earthside furniture offsetting the translucent rear wall, which offered a view of the backcountry beyond.

Gregori, hydraulics and all, was sitting behind a sprawling oak desk, and was much as Storm remembered him, save for the fact that he now wore decent clothes instead of an orange skinsuit. He also had hair, snow-white and delicately balanced atop his prematurely-wrinkled pate.

This must be his birth stream, Storm thought. *That's why his body's resumed the aging process.*

"Storm!" boomed Gregori, spreading his hands wide (he might have held out his arms, had his physical condition not been so precarious). "My God, you haven't changed a bit! It's good to see you!"

"Good to see you, too," Storm said, pumping Gregori's hand. "I see you've made a niche for yourself?"

"Indeed. All the trinkets I can handle. What brings you here?"

"I need a favor."

Gregori nodded, sighed. "You may leave us, Irena."

The young woman with the MIs smiled and exited the office, closing the door

behind her.

"Please, sit, my friend."

Storm took a seat.

"How are the ladies?"

"I don't know," Storm replied. He went momentarily introspective, reminding himself that after much time spent resenting the logistics of Gregori's prison break, it was in the past. Maybe he'd never be able to forgive the man for sacrificing all those lives just to save his own, but neither was he going to hold a grudge. Neither was he going to waste his own second chance at ensuring their deaths were not entirely in vain. "Camie wouldn't leave the station. Jennie was gone by the time I got to the terminal."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Gregori shook his head. "And DK? I hear you two spent some time together on the Gecko Homeworld?"

"Yeah. Learned a lot, utilitarian and otherwise."

"That's good...that's good. If there's a sacred place left in the galaxy, it's the Homeworld."

"Yep. You doing well?"

"I can't complain. After all, I'm something of a scoundrel—but I don't pretend to be anything else. A hole in the ground like this is where I belong. It's where I thrive."

"Oh?"

"My magnum opus comes through my trading—that's the life I've made for myself, it's the shadowy doppelganger I've cast out amongst the stars to do my living for me. Here, confined to my chair, trapped in my dying body, all I want is a livable home, young flesh to keep me warm at night. Irena's mother was killed in a domestic scuffle. I bought the lass at an auction. She cooks and cleans for me, and does other things as well. I'm sure she'll kill me and run away with my savings as soon as she figures out the combination to my safe, but, well, perverse as I may be, working here is likely preferable to working on hands and knees for the truly deplorable in these parts. But you said you need a favor?"

"Yeah. I need you to get me to the Temples of Time."

"Ah...I see." Gregori laughed, turning away and moving over to the window so he could watch the shuttles move to and fro against the horizon. "Still chasing, are you? Lord, Storm. How I wish I had half the ambition you do. I might have actually *done* something with my second chance. As it is, well, I've already told you, haven't I?

"You probably already know that this isn't my chosen stream. It's simply where I was born. I think the majority are stuck like this, being people we don't want to be, living lives that aren't ours, but we do it because there are a billion other streams out there that are a lot worse. We settle. You...you've found something, Storm. A way back, a way forward—a way out." He looked back at Storm and huffed and puffed, tried to catch his breath. "It's dangerous business setting up passage for a grunt like you to the Holy World. Doing so means I'll have to watch my back even more carefully for God knows how long, but...whatever. These

machines won't keep me alive forever. Even now I can feel the weight against my internal organs steadily closing in. This will probably be the last time we speak to one another—I might as well do something meaningful with the time I have left, eh?"

Storm forced a smile. "You're something else, Greg."

"Aren't I, though?"

19. The Temples of Time

Storm was immensely glad when the trip to New Babylon was over. A combination of zerostate and a timer got him through the sixteen hours he had to spend enclosed in the coffin. Fortunately, the freighter into which Gregori had stuffed him was nondescript, and didn't attract any unwanted attention as it bore him through the cracks, undetected by New Babylon's security forces.

Once planetside, a group of Babylonian shippers unloaded the crates from the cargo bay. Gregori had told Storm that he'd be put onto a smaller ground shuttle bound for Maarken, the capitol city where the Temples were located. From what he sensed through the coffin's walls, things were going according to plan. At least, he *hoped* they were. Just because he thought he was being delivered to the right place didn't mean he was anywhere near his intended destination...and the more time passed, the more he wondered if the trip was even a good idea to begin with. *Of course it isn't. This is a stupid idea. You're no chaser. Any minute now the lid's going to pop open, and I'm going to find myself surrounded by a fleet of Patrol officers, maybe even Ketch himself—*

Three firm knocks rattled the crate, followed by still and silence.

Storm waited a moment, remembering his instructions, then pushed open the lid and climbed out. He was standing alone in a lavish, impeccably-furnished funeral parlor that exited into a high-ceilinged hallway with several closed doors on either side. The door at the end of the hallway had been left slightly ajar, allowing bright sunlight to spill in. Flexing his arms, his legs, Storm wondered if Gregori's contact always did this sort of thing—accepting chaser shipments for the right price.

He reset the coffin's lid, stretched once more, made his way down the hall and through the door. Outside, he followed a stone path leading through a small, well-tended garden. The rear gate had been left open—another hint that Storm was to let himself out and be on his way.

Maarken's suburbs were comprised of regal homes, healthy green foliage, cobbled sidewalks, spotless lanes. It was a welcome sight after spending time on Sparrow and Port Carr, where plant life was but a memory. Several Babylonians (the vast majority were human) paid Storm friendly, but not overtly interested glances as they passed on foot, walking their dogs, jogging, or simply strolling with coffee and cell phones in hand. It was a planet-sized affluent neighborhood, everyone's dress impeccable, everyone's template the vainer side of vain—models, actors, athletes, pop stars and starlets. Storm fit right in.

He looked toward the heart of the city and saw the tops of four enormous

pyramids dominating the skyline and sparkling in the sunlight. Always keeping them in his sight, he walked for as long as it took to find the nearest shuttle line, then rode the rest of the way. In under an hour he was standing in a posh foyer. There was no security, no barrier preventing an uninvited outsider from partaking in the bath of the Elites. Why should there be? Maarken's grand illusion was one of perpetual youth and beauty, upper-class prestige, pop culture gloss. Security was something to be kept out of sight and out of mind.

The changing room was unisex. A robed attendant wordlessly showed Storm in. Not that he stared out of any sort of sexual infatuation, but his gaze *did* linger here and there. Himself a model and an athlete, he was no stranger to dressing rooms filled with an abundance of beautiful flesh—but these were *celebrity* breasts and butts, celebrity genitalia, tempered celebrity templates all around.

Storm found a spot and, following everyone's example, started to disrobe, momentarily forgot how to unbutton his shirt when he realized a famous soap star was standing next to him.

"Heck of a morning, isn't it?" Storm greeted, clearing his throat.

She responded with a friendly smile as she lifted her shirt over her head. "You called it. When are you headed?"

"Not too far off the beaten path."

"Those are the best times, aren't they? The little moments that make up a day."

"Absolutely."

"Well..." She glanced appreciatively at Storm's now unclad form. "...try not to have too much fun." She walked away.

How handy the whole thing seemed to her, an Elite. How much of a simple pleasure.

Storm, meanwhile, had gone to great lengths and had lost many friends to be standing where he was.

He left the change room, entered the interior of the temple. Admittedly, he was impressed by the Roman bath motif—even though he knew it was more homage than genuine design (there was an obvious gift shop at the far end). On Earth, you sat in a cold, mechanical helm during the streaming process; here, time streams were literal streams in which you swam. The technology was so subtle as to be magic. Numerous Elites swam or bathed, their bodies seemingly shimmering in and out of existence, in and out of time. They were chasers, when you got right down to it. Oh, they weren't *called* chasers—that term was reserved for the ordinary unwashed masses who strayed from their birth streams without permission from the government—but they were chasers nonetheless. They were simply wealthy and powerful enough that they were allowed to stream whenever they wanted as long as they observed their contracts. Most didn't even care about alternate timelines; their products were their bodies, their expensive templates. Their respective agents, managers, publicists, sponsors, or coaches expected them to avail themselves of the beneficial effects of free-form streaming: perpetual youth and vitality. Maintaining their products.

At least, until their contracts expired.

Descending into the water, wading waist-deep, Storm became aware of a white noise that affected all of his senses at once. Sight, sound, taste, touch, smell—he was experiencing infinity, every timeline that ever existed (and would exist), all at once. He shuddered at the onslaught, and might have stumbled, but retained his composure thanks to DK's training. At first he tried to fight it, to block out the myriad realities or arrange them into some kind of order in his mind. However, he quickly realized the futility in battling the whole, and so instead honed in on a very small part, on a single, very familiar aspect.

Trudie.

She was with him suddenly, a mental image clad in a bright orange skinsuit, embracing him in a lonely prison cell as he pretended not to be thinking of something—some*one*—else. He shook his head and she became a dark-skinned ghetto girl leading him down a moonlit alley caught between the societal cracks of Sparrow. He took another step and she was back with him in San Francisco, the two of them sprawling on the couch and sharing a rare meaningful moment:

I love it when you just lie with me and we pig out on sweet potato chips and watch the news together. Baby, you make me high.

Trudie, nonchalantly spitting watermelon seeds at him at their table in Oro's cafeteria:

I don't give a crap about you, Storm—but you're the only guy who's ever treated me decently, you know that? And if you ever ditch this place, God willing, I want you to remember that when you're breaking some other lucky lady's heart.

Trudie, as an overly-developed bodybuilder sitting at her desk after hours and sneaking a gleeful glance over one shoulder—not saying anything, just admiring Storm when she thought he wasn't paying attention, and looking happier and more satisfied than anyone he'd ever known. Storm now watching her watch him, basking in the dubious pride of what his own excessive template had accomplished in so little time. And it hit him: *She's more than just a brawny babe starved for some loving. She's really into me. And I don't love her back—I've never loved her.* He blinked, and the muscle woman was gone, replaced by her San Fran counterpart.

I love the idea *of her. The idea that I* should *love her back, that she's more to me than just a...familiarity.* But the signs had always been there: the late-night insomnia listening to political talk shows on his headset; the lackluster college career and ensuing day job as a shuttle repair grunt; how easily he'd found solace in the embraces of other women. He didn't belong in San Francisco any more than he'd belonged on Moon 608. Being ejected from his birth stream had set him on autopilot—he'd been using Trudie as an excuse to get back, to resume his mediocre life because he had nowhere else to go, because without her he was directionless. If he wasn't chasing her time, if he wasn't whittling away the hours and days in a prison cell with her, if he wasn't making ends meet with her in a sweltering, overcrowded trading hub, what meaning did his life have? What was the point?

Storm opened his eyes, tried to center himself. He was so deep in thought that he hardly noticed anything or anyone around him. Certainly he didn't realize what was happening near the temple entrance until it was too late—

—and then there was chaos as a gaggle of Patrolmen burst inside, each and every one of their laser rifles pointed at Storm's head. They wore sealed suits to protect them from the flux of overlapping streams, and were absolutely unfazed by the torrent of screaming naked celebrities now splashing for cover.

"Hands above your head!" shouted one of the Patrolmen menacingly.

Storm obeyed, albeit somewhat awkwardly, as his mind was straddling multiple streams. He was so close, and yet remained rooted to the spot. It wasn't an issue of logistics; DK's training had helped him acclimate reasonably well to the nuances of free-form streaming. No, this was an issue of semantics. Did he *want* to go back to the way things were, in the life that once was?

"Storm Anderson," came a familiar voice—this one bringing an echo of fear and hatred with it. "At last we are allowed an encore reunion."

He turned in place, found himself face to face with Foreman Ketch, who stood with his arms folded and a smile on his lips. He was exactly the same as he'd always been—time hadn't touched his hawk-like visage. Unlike his men, he wore no protective suit, but that was no surprise since he was an immortal and, apparently, an avatar quite comfortable in the free form.

"You again," Storm responded coldly. "I must be quite the thorn in the Patrol's side for you to make an appearance here—or do all higher-ups get to enjoy the splendor while three quarters of the galaxy fights over novelty time machines?"

Ketch smiled. "I pride myself on my patience, and I must admit that you gave me quite a run for the money. Annoying at times, but overall a memorable experience. Not just for me, but for all the human race. You have become an icon of sorts, a symbol to the people of what we can achieve when we are driven by fear and intolerance. There's are videocast specials on you running 'round the clock. But all is not lost, for very shortly you will have one last chance to redeem yourself as you make an example of what happens to renegade streamers when justice is finally enforced."

"Justice?" echoed Storm with the mother of all disgusted expressions. "You call this justice? Shooting an unarmed man in the bath?"

Ketch stepped in close. "I call it justice when the man responsible for the permanent alteration of the space-time continuum is at last captured and given the punishment he deserves for his crimes."

"Still using outdated science, eh? But you forget—I know the truth now. I've seen across the streams. There isn't just *one* timeline, *one* beginning, *one* end."

"You've said as much during our previous meetings."

"It doesn't end here—it never ends. You know it as well as I. Push someone like me out of the way and I just slip into another cosmic layer. We're all the same energy. We're all trying to stave off the boredom and the fear by making up roles for ourselves in the game of life."

Ketch's face darkened. "You know, when I return to my own time, several decades from now, and have to put the missing pieces of the puzzle that you've destroyed back together."

"What *puzzle*? What *pieces*?"

"Fans, copycats, fundamentalists, all inspired by your story. It's anarchy down the line, Mr. Anderson. Order and certainty, our assurance amongst the stars—replaced with random chance. Chaos. Timelines meandering wherever and whenever."

"Maybe it's better that way. Maybe it's better not knowing what was, or what could've been."

"Regardless, I will take great pleasure in ridding Standard of you once and for all."

"Don't be too sure."

"On the contrary, I am quite certain you will never be seen again after today. I have taken the liberty of finding your birth stream and insuring that you are never born. Your family and friends are being taken care of, too, as we speak."

Being taken care of. Storm felt the urge to vomit, but held back his weakness; if he was to go down, he was determined to go down with dignity. "Still the same old story, huh? Defeating your victims at their weakest moments." It was an outright attempt at verbal leverage and he knew it, but words were all he had now.

Ketch had them as well. "Chris said something like that just before he expired."

Suddenly Storm's sanity cracked. He couldn't keep the rage under control anymore as he lunged for Ketch, pulling him into the water with him, grabbing his neck. If nothing else, he demanded to see this man's death before his own.

The assault took everyone by surprise. The Patrolmen stepped back, aiming their weapons, but not discharging them as Storm and Ketch staggered in a murderous embrace. For a moment it looked as if Storm was winning. Ketch's face was beet-red by the time he managed to raise a hand above his shoulder and snap his finger. The soldiers nearby tensed, lifting their rifles.

"Stop immediately or we will open fire!" one of them yelled.

Storm cast a crazed glance toward the men and knew that as much as he would have liked to see Ketch die beside him, the inner-urges that had kept him alive for all this time made him far more afraid of dying. He trusted, he *believed* there was a way to continue without the physical anchor of his body, but he didn't yet *know*—and so everything he'd done and experienced in this life might have been part of his spiritual growth...or it might have simply been part of the highly complex chain of biological and chemical responses that comprised his magnificent human template.

"Storm," gurgled Ketch as he worked to loosen the death-grip on his neck. "Release me and you have a chance. Else, you're as good as dead. A shame to end this way after all this time..."

It was over, then. Storm knew the man was lying, knew there was nothing left here but a grim inevitability—and yet he let go, physically and mentally stricken by a new inexplicable epiphany. Relinquishing his grip, he splashed backward several steps, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his entire body shuddering.

Ketch rubbed his neck and made a commanding gesture with his hand. "Shoot him," he ordered, his voice hoarse but impeccably devoid of emotion.

Storm merely stood and waited, didn't even cry out in pain as a laser charge ripped through his core, tore him apart so efficiently that there wasn't a drop of

blood or strand of hair left to mark his ever having existed.

* * *

Fire laps at him, cleansing him of everything but a single all-encompassing impression of a spiral galaxy turning and turning—and then there is emptiness, a void more overwhelming than the most horrific nightmare, tiny points of light spread far apart and representing distant universes not yet grown large enough to fill the endlessness; falling face-forward in every direction at once as he falls into himself, his memories swirling all around without a brain to hold it all and he grabs at the first image to emerge from the chaos, the first place and time, holding it, holding it...

* * *

The beaches of Moon 3 were known to be some of the most beautiful in the galaxy. Crystal clear waters lapped at white sands faintly glittering in the violet light of the weather satellites orbiting above. Here and there, tall, spindly-looking palms and lulling goose-tongues swayed in a gentle breeze that tousled the shore during an utterly breathtaking (if man-made) evening.

Storm lifted his head, sucked in a deep breath as he coughed sand and spittle. He sat up—and felt as if two versions of himself were occupying the same body. One shivering from the shock of being blasted in the chest by a laser rifle, the other shivering from the cold and claustrophobia of being stuffed into a flesh body so he could meet Chris in time for—

—Chris, he thought. The rendezvous point. My God, I'm doing it all over again.

All sorts of notions flashed through his mind, then, and he got to his feet, squinted in the direction of where he knew the shuttle would be landing soon. His first instinct—his original instinct—was to get there as quickly as possible, so as not to miss his friend. However, a dozen steps along, he turned around and started walking in the opposite direction, ascending the wind-sculpted slopes until he found a patch of goose-tongues to squat behind.

He waited, and, as expected, the shuttle came, hovering over the beach and training its lights back and forth, back and forth. Eventually it lifted off and was gone.

Without clothes, without identification—without a future—Storm wandered the beach. He thought of the Void, the infinitesimal universes he'd spied in the fraction of an instant, the many, many worlds where he'd ended his life locked in a death-hold with Foreman Ketch, and he wondered if it hadn't been part of the foreman's plan, to keep him locked in the karmic cycle, stuck in the Patrol's exhaustive database—trapped in Standard as long as he continued to blindly follow the loop that lead him to the Temples of Time and to death.

This world, however, was a completely new offshoot. New, but more familiar and reassuring than anything Storm had ever known—because it was his. In

breaking the cycle, in letting go of everything at the last instant, he'd created a new quantum possibility that no one knew about, and that meant he was off the map.

Free, he thought.

He hoped.

He thought of physics, of science and the technical possibility that the Patrol's laser rifles, in such close proximity with the Temple time streams, had created some sort of time warp transferring his molecules into an adjacent stream. In the end, however, he decided on a miracle.

He walked for a while, breathed the air, listened to the sea—tried to figure out what he'd done, what he was going to do. *Only a chaser could have pulled off something like this,* he thought, *but I'm no chaser. I'm no master of the streams.* During his time on the Gecko Homeworld, DK had taught him things, mostly of a disciplinary nature, but the truths he'd found there had been less revelatory than he'd expected. There had been no magic spells, no metaphysics—no veteran holy men levitating for the amusement of others. Nothing like he used to see in the newsfeeds back on Earth.

There is only the center, DK had once said. *The desire within that shapes what is without. You have a thought that travels through the motions of your body and affects the physical world around you to get you what you want. Chasers know that sometimes to get what they want they have to adjust the world around them before they can affect it.*

Is that what he'd done, then? Changed the universe around him?

Eventually he crossed paths with a married couple, John and Suzanne, who invited him onto their towel. When they asked him about his clothes, he lied, made up a story about the tide washing them away. They smiled and laughed politely and offered him what they had, as well as a lift into the city.

During the drive, he sat quietly in his seat and stared at the stars, and he felt at peace—physically apart from his birth stream, yes, but at home in the universe.

My own little universe, he thought, recalling Foreman Ketch's ominous words regarding the erasure of his birth stream. *This might be a dream, or I might be dead—but it's still happening. Somehow I still exist, and with an entirely new set of circumstances...something the Patrol can't touch because it's not listed in their database.*

"You okay back there, buddy?" asked John, friendly eyes twinkling in the rear-view mirror.

Storm smiled, inside and out, and wiped a tear from his cheek. "Couldn't be better."

"So, where to?"

"Sparrow, I think. Got an old friend I've been meaning to visit."

"Ah, Sparrow. Suzy and myself visited there a few years ago. Amazing outback, once you're out of the city."

Storm nodded, and he thought of Chris, still alive, and of Trudie, Jason, DK, Jennie, Annah—all still alive, all still untouched in this instance where the worst had never happened.

He closed his eyes and dreamed.

About the Author

Jesse Gordon is the occasional author of numerous books, short stories, and screenplays. He is also creator and supreme overlord of the *SuperMegaNet* pseudoverse. Current projects include finishing his latest novel and finding the perfect matcha latte, though not necessarily in that order.